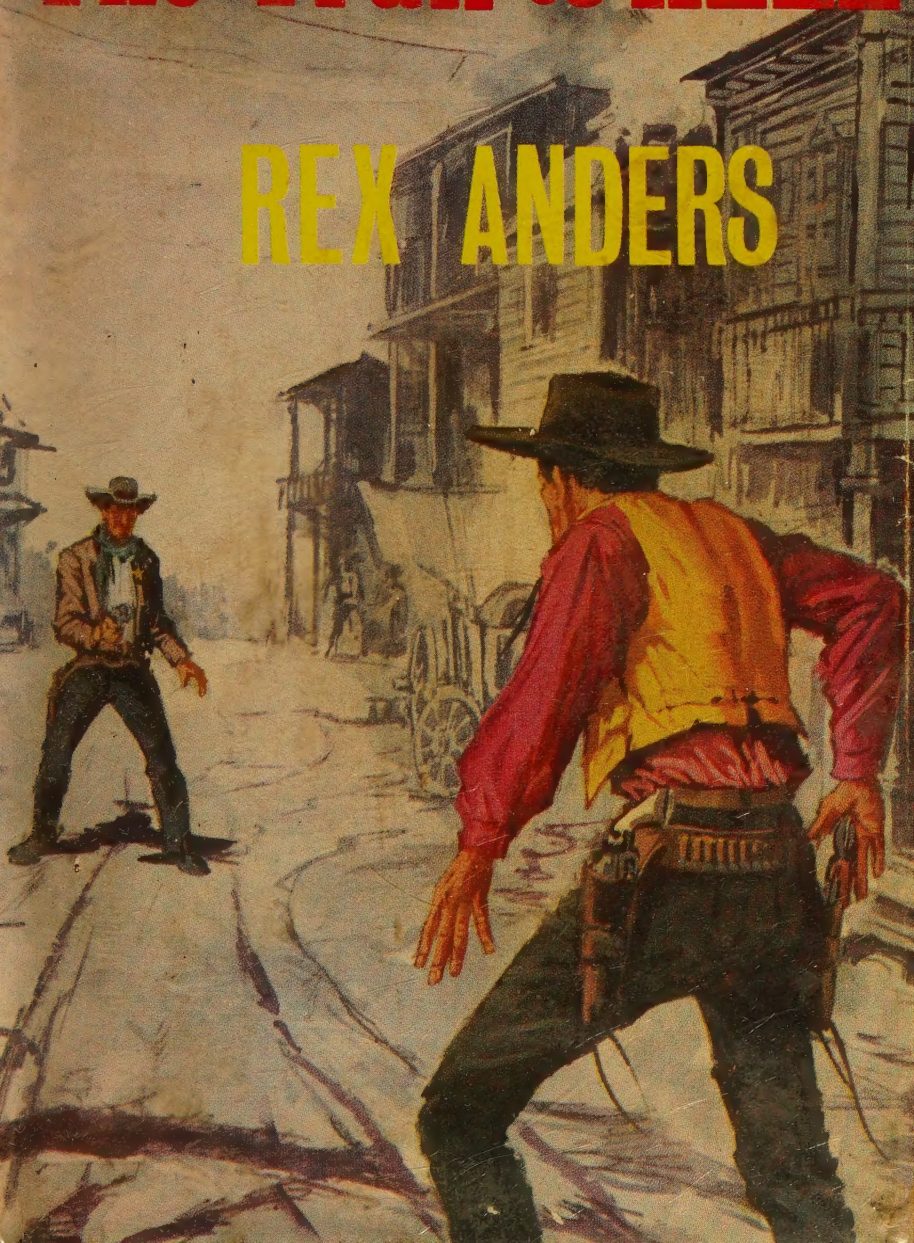


The Trail to HELL

REX ANDERS



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by REX ANDERS

Author of
"Saddle the Lightning", etc.

Huck Callaway had a method of dealing with folk who got in his way—he knocked them out of it. So when Huck's homecoming was a greeting by gentry who barred his way with guns, all hell broke loose. Soon the enemies of Sol Heath's Flying H were to find Huck and his methods about as palatable as the arsenic they were using to poison Sol's cattle.

But Huck was in for a shock when he discovered there was an even faster gun around, and a bigger one when he learned that its owner was the son of Myra Besant of whom he had once been very fond. All at once the fight had become a personal one, for Huck knew that for Myra's sake he had to save the boy from himself. That meant waging a lone duel against the killer guns with the knowledge that the deadliest enemy of them all was the one he must not kill.

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Troubled Range

Saddle the Lightning

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REX ANDERS

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ONE

HUCK CALLAWAY eased his sore backside against the jolt of his saddle. Yet he was more interested in what lay ahead than in his own discomfort. He watched the steep walls of the valley looming from the rock terrain. There random sunbeams found bedded quartz and splintered into arrows of radiance that cut the farther shadows and vanished. Diamond Pass, men called the place. A guy didn't have to ask why. It was exactly as Huck remembered it from eighteen years back. The dark gateway to Kudo and the greenland.

Places didn't change, Huck reflected. Just men. They grew older and uglier—profane or pious, richer or poorer. Money, or the lack of it, did most to shape a guy. Think rich and you'll grow rich. That's what some men said. Work hard and fill the bank. That's what others yammered. But the answer was neither this way nor that. Huck knew; he'd tried both, and a few others. None of 'em worked; not for him, at least. That's why he'd hired his gun since the devil knew when. That's why he was riding home at last—his gun still on hire.

He tilted his faded J.B. over his glare troubled eyes, and worked his shoulderblades against an irritation at the centre of his back. Had a bug or two, he shouldn't

wonder. Damned sheep country he'd crossed, back a-piece. What with the stink and the ticks—

He gave a startled jerk backwards. The bullet had missed him by an inch. Now the rifle crash seemed fit to split a mountain. "Hold it, mister!" a voice warned from the rocks on his right. "Lift 'em high!"

Huck reined in. He slowly lifted his hands. He glanced round quizzically. It was like those high-pitched tones had suggested. The hold-up man was a hold-up boy—youth, at any rate; not more than seventeen, eighteen years old. Tall strip of a kid, all bone, big-eyed and copper-knobbed. "Mornin', sonny," Huck yawned, taking in the normally pleasant contours of the hard young face more closely. He felt the tiniest prod at his memory. A comment was off his tongue before he knew it. "Y'know, you remind me o' somebody. Swear to Pete, y'do!"

"Like the horny one, mebbe?" the kid asked toughly, his rifle barrel advancing to within ten feet.

"Wouldn't put it that high," Huck drawled. "Jest like a sprout what's been at the cookie jar and needs his ass kicked."

"Why, you—!" The Winchester's ejector clacked sharply.

"D'you mean to tell me," said Huck severely, "you has been standin' there without one up the spout? You got a lot to learn. Y'see this old well-worn hogleg I got tied to my leg? I could've got it out and blown you twice round Sunday before you primed that 30.30. 'Nother thing. If you're goin' to make a fust class hold-up man, you better remember the fust thing's to disarm your victim. There's some tolerable cagey critters about."

The kid was blushing like his ma's best strawberry jam.

"You think I don't know all that, smart guy. I got the fastest draw this side of any place. If you'd've slapped leather, I'd've had all six in you before your barrel even see'd light."

"That good, huh?"

"The best."

"Always did like confidence—in a man."

"You sayin' I aint a man?"

"How's your razor?"

The boy rubbed his hairless chin, trying to make it rasp a bit. "Got me a genuwine Hamburg and an Injun leather strop. Get me a fancy lather soap from back East. Like you see, a real smooth shave."

"Bottom smooth," Huck reflected; then he had another yawn. "Look, son, I'm a busy guy. Do I turn out my pockets? I got six dollars-forty. A gold medal some old bull earned down in San Antone; a piece o' twine and a shut-knife—yeah, and a lady's garter. You're welcome to all 'cept the garter. It bein' a most particular reminder o' things you aint hardly old enough to know about."

"I ain't no highwayman—g'damn you!"

Huck lowered his hands and slapped his saddlehorn. "Then what the tarnation jumpin' Jefferson Davis is you a playin' at then, boy?"

The Winchester boomed again. The slug just touched Huck's slouch brim and spun the Stetson cross-wise to his square skull. He jumped about a foot out of the saddle. "Didn't even hear your rattle!" he rasped, all banter gone from his tones.

"Didn't tell you to pull your paws down." The boy had worked the ejector this time; he was looking shaken and grim. "All I want you t'do is, kick that dun round and get the hell back where you come from!"

Huck put pressure on the bit. His mount came round. "You got the persuader." Huck prepared to spur; but the gnaw of his unsatisfied memory became undeniably insistent. "What's your name, kid?"

"You won't be usin' it round here."

"Oh, but I'll be back."

"Mister," the youngster said hoarsely, "you've had your warning. Ride up to Diamond Pass again—and you'll go through it to Boothill! For the last time—git!"

Huck set his horse in motion, but had covered less than twenty yards when he was again challenged from the rocks—this time by a Winchester in the hands of a black-bearded giant whose irregular, craggy features and leaden eyes spelled wickedness in tall capitals. "Root, Callaway! Toss out the Colt. Careful!" Huck nipped his gunbutt between thumb and first finger, plucked the weapon, and dropped it into the dust.

His gaze searched the big guy's face. Yes, it was Igor Farson. Now Huck felt the numbing chill of fear. Even as a kid, Farson had had a warp of cruelty where other folk carried their backbones. Bully, petty thief, road agent—killer; the giant had graduated in crime to Huck's certain memory. The years could only have perfected his vicious talents. But whatever else you did, you didn't show a guy like Farson that you were even the tidiest bit afraid of him; so Huck hooked a leg around his pommel and said: "Aint they hanged you yet, Iggy? Well, y'aint changed much. All long gun and pig-ugly as ever. S'pose you want me to turn round and go back the other way. Feller can't win on this here wheel!"

"You aint on it for much longer," said the hairy lips, a grin above them crushing wolfishly upwards until the

narrowing eyes all but vanished in lard. "Come here, Will Besant!"

Huck heard the kid dragging reluctant feet through the scree piles behind him. Suddenly that little problem of memory was solved. Besant. Johnno Besant. The man Myra Hansen had married. He'd heard about it. Heck—but that was way back. Could have been only months after he had set out on his youthful jog for points south. In Amarillo, it'd been. That trailherder had said. The trailherder who'd got ventilated for dealing shiners. Yep; that'd explain it. The resemblance. The kid was Myra's son.

"Boy," Huck said, as Besant stepped sheepishly up to the towering Farson, "I knew your mummy."

"Well," Farson mimicked, "he ain't got a daddy. Daddy's pushin' up the zinnias. I does for daddy, don't I, cub?" The big man lashed out with a palm and caught the kid a ringing slap that spun him half way round. "That is for not learnin' your lesson."

Will Besant slumped down on a rock, cheek reddened, eyes all fired up. "Lesson, you call it?" he demanded chokily. "To kill a man what ain't got a chance? To go stinkin' drygulch!"

Farson haw-hawed; but his eyes never left Huck for an instant. "Eighteen, ain't you? And never killed a man. Worse'n a gal bein' sixteen and never kissed."

"Wish to hell you'd choke on that fuzz!"

The giant again lifted a hand threateningly. "Want another?"

Will Besant flinched.

Farson leered. "See you don't. Cub, you had an order. You saw that tintype o' Callaway. You was to recognise and shoot him dead. Said I'd leave it to you, but knew

I couldn't trust you—you havin' your paw's mew heart; so I stayed to watch."

"What's it matter," the boy asked defiantly, "so long as he don't make the greenland and Sol Heath's place? Dead—or gone back. It'd come to the same thing. He wouldn't be here."

"What-ho!" Farson sneered. "Ain't nothin' like a wooden box and a ton o' earth to make certain. Heard you tell the b-d you'd nail him if he ever come back. Well, he's jest about to come back. So spring one into the barrel!"

The kid got up. Huck saw Will's ma in that up-tilting chin and proud eye. "Beat me to bits. I won't commit murder!"

"I'll beat you to bits," Farson promised. "Bein' high-an'-mighty, huh? You ain't honest. You're gettin' paid."

"To herd beef. That's what I hired for."

"And what all!" the giant exclaimed scornfully. His left hooked savagely. It caught Will on the side of the jaw. The boy went down—lay semi-conscious for a few moments, then lifted on to an elbow, shook his head, and groaned softly. "If you've got a yellor gut, you've got a yellor gut," Farson continued harshly. "So you'll jest have to watch while I turns Mr Huck Callaway into buzzard meat!" The leaden eyes surveyed Huck in a long, brutally savouring stare. "Pluggin' you is goin' to pleasure me mightily. You whupped me once, when we was sprouts. I ain't forgotten. An' you was the clever one in the schoolhouse. Best shot; hot-seat bull-dogger. And you had Myra Hansen all of a tizzy over you, too. Big record. It'll take jest a mite o' lead to end it all. So climb off that cayuse!"

Huck's mouth hardened. Things looked bad for him;

never worse. He'd faced death fifty times, but always with a gun in his fist. Always with the chance that his skill could give him. He'd expected to die by the gun; a faster gun, maybe. But never as a target for a hellion staging cold-blooded murder.

His heels hit the thick, sandy grit underfoot. He stepped away from his horse.

"Stand agin that flat-sided rock," Farson ordered, pointing to a tall slab of trailside basalt. "That way I'll see you nice and clearly."

Huck's knees went wooden. His brain became par-blind with terror. He stumbled to the stone. The life seemed to be rotting away from him. He couldn't—wouldn't!—let it decay. He crushed his fists; summoned the last of his resources. A whirl of energy snatched the haze off his mind. He saw life and death for what they were. That life was all. That death was nothing. There was a profundity in the obvious. To live was to fight; just fight—anyhow.

He backed against the basalt. His blood was singing. Farson's rifle was up. The man's drooling, mad-eyed joy was terrible to see. There was a second left. Only a second. Fight. Fight. Live!

With a lightning duck, Huck hit his knees as Farson's slug wrenched the hat from his head. His clawing fingers clutched in a handful of grit. The big man cursed sulphurously. He leapt back, barrel depressing, ejector clacking. Huck rolled inches wide of a spanging missile, tipped back, and flung the contents of his hand. The stream of grey dust dashed across the giant's face. He screeched in pain and instinctively shut his eyes against the blinding grains.

Huck catapulted off the trail. He tore the Winchester

from the floundering Farson's grasp, and hurled it aside. His brain worked to the leaven of fury. He meant to hurt Igor Farson; he meant to hurt the blackbeard a lot. The man would think twice before he ever again stood a wayfarer against a rock and drew a deliberate bead on the poor critter's forehead. Yes, sir!

Left and right to the belly, left and right to the head. The roaring Farson blundered this way and that, still rubbing at his eyes. Huck threw an ear-squashing hay-maker. Then he dug for his reeling victim's kidneys: chopped at a bullneck. And as the giant's head came down, struck upwards with a knee that set nose and lips leaking together. A quick kick to the hamstrings dumped Farson on the ground.

"Get up!" Huck mouthed. "Get up, you over-loaded passel o' rancid bear fat!"

Farson obliged. He was cursing and snarling—a ruin between the chin and the bridge of the nose. But his bleary eyes were open, and he could see. There was a Colt in his belt. He went for it. Huck kicked it from his hand—dived in again, fists pumping. He closed an eye, split a cheek, beat Farson until the giant slumped back over a rock and pleaded for mercy.

"Mercy!" Huck panted. "What mercy do you deserve from me?"

Nevertheless, he made the mistake of standing off for a moment. Abusing the respite, Farson whirled off the rock and tossed a tremendous right. Huck stopped all of it. He performed a series of somersaults before crashing against a boulder. He spat out a tooth and reduced his milling senses to a square inch of clarity. Farson hurtled at him—a ponderous image that blotted into the haze beyond his limited vision. Somehow Huck got his boot-

soles up and met the rush with thighs levering. He sent the big man staggering backwards and on to his rump. Farson sat and blinked at him. Then they rose together. Huck meandered at his enemy, slipped a right swing, and jammed his crown under the other's jaw. The giant's corded neck absorbed the teeth-rattling butt. His arms met around Huck in an attempted bear-hug; but Huck had had that one to deal with before. He shrank in upon himself and wriggled downwards, passing out of the tightening limbs before they could secure their spine-pinch. He drove in a punch directly under the right base of his opponent's ribs. Farson's torso buckled distinctly; so Huck shot in a similar punch on the opposite side. Saliva spilled through the giant's teeth. He was hurt. "Cuss you!" he gasped weakly, sinking a slack jaw towards an up-flashing right. His snapping teeth caught his tongue between them. Blood dribbled into his beard. Huck switched feet and shot a right to the solar plexus. The punch carried everything he had. It buried wrist deep in fat. The big man's eyes popped, and his legs gave out. He was near his knees when Huck threw in a finishing cross that spun him on to his face and left him lying without a quiver.

Huck placed his arms akimbo and took several deep breaths. Then he recovered his bullet damaged headgear and, after thumping it into a worse shape than it had presented before, jammed it on to his head. He searched for his Colt, found and holstered it, after which he picked up Farson's rifle and pistol and threw them as far as he could into the rocks. He whistled up his horse and, facing towards Diamond Pass, prepared to mount.

"Where d'you think you're a-goin' now?" The boy

was asking. He was taut, white faced and trembling; seemed under some sort of compulsion.

"Boy," Huck said, with cautious sympathy, "you've had enough trouble for one day. Fact, that swelled up jaw'll last you a week."

"I asked where you was goin'."

"Through the pass."

"You ain't. I gotta stop you. Only now it's man to man."

"That makes the difference, huh?" Huck sighed heavily. "I knew your ma, sonny. I knew her real well. I'd do most things not to bring her more sadness than she's no doubt had to bear. But I got a livin' to earn—you boys has got my dander up; an' I'm goin' through that pass."

"It'll be feet first." The kid let his right hand dangle just below his holster.

"This ain't no contest," Huck pleaded. "I'm a professional, boy!"

"I told you. I got about the fastest gun there is."

"That," Huck ground out, "is what they all think at your age. Make your play."

"You're challenged."

Huck's eyes narrowed. Will Besant needed a lesson. One he'd never forget. Humiliation would do more than pain for his type. Huck decided to shoot the gun out of the kid's hand; maybe cut the holster off his belt. Let him see what real shooting was like.

Making his fastest draw, Huck had his Colt clear and cocked in a split second; but, to his amazement, the pistol opposite blurred level in better than equal time to his own. And there they stood, frozen and unsure, the boy's face all gleaming ivory—Huck's brown, deep-

etched, and hard. They went on covering each other for a good half minute before either spoke; then Will blurted: "Why—why didn't you fire?"

Huck thought about it. He simply didn't know. "Why didn't you?" he countered.

The kid hung his head, and his gun muzzle drooped. "I weren't afraid," he said.

"I know you weren't," Huck replied; and he meant it. Then he dropped his Colt into leather, and stepped into the saddle. He touched the dun into motion.

"I might still kill you," the boy threatened; but it was pure play acting now.

Huck glanced over his shoulder. "You didn't kill me just now, boy; so you'll never kill me." He rode a few yards further, was bothered by a sudden wave of emotion and, despite himself, looked back again. "You're as fast as you said. The fastest I've ever seen. But you're in bad company. Company that rides the trail of the gun. And that trail goes straight to hell. I know—I've travelled it. Don't ride it, kid. For the sake of a life you just spared—don't!"

TWO

IT WAS about two in the afternoon when Huck neared Sol Heath's Flying H ranch house. He rode in unheralded, dismounted at the kitchen rail, and spun a hitch. Removing his hat, he beat the travel dust out of his clothing, walked up to the door and knocked. He was answered by a middle-aged woman. She was dumpy, over-ripe, and had a harrassed eye. "Yes?" she inquired, nervously wiping wash-softened hands in a linen apron.

"Name's Callaway, ma'am."

"You're—expected?"

"Got a letter from Mr Sol Heath, ma'am. Was in Santa Fé. I'm answering."

"Santa Fé. That's three hundred miles."

"About, ma'am."

"Wouldn't it have been easier—?" The woman didn't complete her question. She glanced down at the professional hang of Huck's sixgun, then studied the crooked challenge of his large, fight-damaged features. She appeared to recall something—something she didn't like; for her eyes lit with a hostile gleam and the tendons of her throat strained against grey wrinkles. "Mr Callaway?"

"Callaway, ma'am."

"I seem to remember that my husband wrote to a man of that name. He is in his office. If you'll follow me."

Huck put a hinge in his six feet two in order to pass through the door without banging his head. Mrs Heath led him across a red tiled kitchen that smelled of honey cakes and gingerbread. His stomach rolled hungrily. He hadn't eaten for a dozen hours and more. He'd heard that you could influence the mind of a person by thinking at him. He thought at Mrs Heath mighty hard. For, just then, he'd rather have become acquainted with her cooking than her husband. But the good woman remained uninfluenced by all his mental effort. She beckoned him into a poorly lighted passage. They walked a few paces along it before she stopped outside a door and knocked tentatively.

"That you, my dear?" a man's voice asked. "Come in. I'm not too busy."

Mrs Heath set her hand upon the doorknob. "Man to see you. Mr Callaway."

"Well, bring him in!"

Opening the door, Mrs Heath stood aside and let Huck brush past her into the office. On his left, he saw a bald, round-faced man bulging behind a desk that looked a size and a half too small for him. The two men smiled at each other. Then the lady of the ranch shut the door with rather more force than necessary.

"Sol Heath," the rancher said, rising and offering a hand.

Huck took the hand. Heath's grip was as warm and sincere as the light in his brown eyes. "I wondered about that letter," he said.

"I ain't much for writin'," Huck drawled. "One o' two things happen to most o' my letters. Them that don't

mean a hoot go into the pot-belly. Them that need answerin', I mostly answer in person. 'Cos they need answerin' that way."

"You make yourself sound like a kind of drummer, Callaway," Sol Heath jested.

"Firm o' Samuel C.," Huck agreed.

Heath thumbed up the lid of a cigar box and offered the contents.

"Obliged," Huck acknowledged, taking a cigar and nipping a fraction of its end with his teeth. He went to the open window and spat out the result. Heath struck a match for him and he sucked a light. "Obliged," he repeated, savouring the leaf. "The island?"

"The island. Connoisseur?"

"By no means. Jest know a good cigar. Got the habit across in New Orleans. Come seventy-five high, don't they?"

"On the dollar now."

"By damn! The cost o' living."

Heath laughed. "You've handled money."

"Handled's right." Huck sat down in a hoop-backed chair at the rancher's nod. He crossed his legs comfortably; studied the greying tip of his leaf. "Yes, sir. I'm a travellin' man come home. Was born in Kudo, y'know."

"I've heard. I thought that might be an asset."

Huck relaxed still further. They were getting to it now. The letter hadn't told him much—except that Flying H had a gun job on offer, and that there'd be good money in it. "Never can tell which column is which."

"Always on the credit side to know the terrain. Whisky?"

"What's an Havana without it?"

Heath opened a lacquered cabinet. He took out a cut glass decanter and a couple of glasses. He poured liberally for Huck, sparingly for himself. "Have to go easy," he explained, patting his pendulous belly as they toasted each other. "Doc says so. Ah!" His drink had hit the spot. "You'd recall Bawley Fawcett," he said, returning to his chair behind the desk.

"Bawley? Sure. He'd be pushin' sixty now. Once had a bitin' contest with a king rattler. Went one round. The rattler died of blood poisonin'."

"The man hasn't changed."

"It concerns Bawley?"

"Yes." Heath's plump hands put pressure on his glass. "The Fawcett Link Double O is trying to put me out of business."

Huck jammed his cigar into the corner of his mouth. "Now that," he said, "is interestin'. Bawley always had the disease."

"Disease?"

"Grab. What's the symptoms about now?"

"There's bought law in Kudo."

"Figures. That's why your humble an' obedient is here. Ain't never been more'n just inside the law myself. You have to fight fire with fire." Huck laughed harshly. "Don't let my rough tongue embarrass you, Mr Heath; that's how it is. So let's be open about it."

The rancher nodded weightily. "Very well. I like a forthright man. Bluntly, it's no good taking my problem to the local law, and I doubt if I'd get a hearing from the Federal Authorities while there was still time to save the Flying H. This isn't easy to word. And it's not the sort of thing officials would bother their august heads over. But you, knowing the country, will come to a quick

understanding." Heath paused. "More whisky, Callaway?"

Huck covered the top of his glass with his palm. "Not if I'm to come to a quick understandin'."

"Here's a map, then." The rancher extracted a roll of discoloured paper from a drawer that he strained open against his middle. Hefting his two fifty from his chair again, he fetched the map to Huck's feet, and there unrolled it. He placed a knee on either side of the spread paper, so that its tracteries lay flat and clearly exposed. "Here we have the Flying H and the high rock portion of the Link Double O adjacent. Both ranches are watered, in the main, by tributaries from the Cimarron. There are two big watercourses. One runs slap bang west and east down the centre of the Link Double O; that's the real greenland—and to be envied. The second comes south across Fawcett's land, more-or-less at the border and used—I say *used*, you'll note—to spill off the rock country and curve deeply through my north graze before running east again to rejoin the Cimarron. What's happened's this: Fawcett's blasted a dam up there"—Heath dabbed a podgy finger where a southern section of the Link Double O highland was indicated on the map—"and the water from the second feed no longer comes my way. It's been turned back into an ancient and shorter channel that leads to the river. Means Fawcett is getting a water supply he doesn't need—and that my northern grass is no longer available to my stock." The rancher's finger rubbed across paper to a faint marking on his distant south range. "Here's my only water supply now. It's spring fed from a source under two hills—there and there—that we call the Anglos. The supply is barely adequate to the needs of my stock. But that

isn't it. Because of the water difficulty, only my southern range is in use. I've got five thousand acres lying ungrazed to the north. Can you imagine what my six thousand head are doing to the two thousand acres of grass that they are feeding from? The grass is damn nearly eaten off. The lie of the land won't permit irrigation cutting. And it'd be impossible to carry water for all those beeves—" Heath's chin flopped among its jowls, and his hands lifted in despair.

Huck finished his whisky. "Either you get your northern water supply back—or you're done for."

"Obviously. And to cap it all, Bawley Fawcett has already offered to buy me out, lock-stock-and-barrel, at a price that'd barely save me from bankruptcy. He informed me the offer would remain open till the end of the month. Says he'll pick up the Flying H by paying off my creditors, if I don't sell. It'd come to that. It's his pride—his mocking, curse-blamed pride, that's pushed him to the offer. He wants me to grovel for hen-feed."

"Aint pretty," Huck conceded. "I don't know a whole lot about water rights; but I do know a man can do most anythin' on his own property—short o' committin' murder. Court hearin'd probably call that dam up an 'act o' God', or something, if that's what Fawcett said it was." Huck dragged hard on his cigar. "Yup. You come to the right man. It's a sneak job. Dead o' night and dynamite."

"You're with me?"

Huck gave a wry but knowing grin. "You mentioned a thousand bucks in your letter. I've gunpowdered more'n one nest o' yellowjackets for less'n that."

"We'll be moving outside the law," Heath observed. "Could mean jail, if everything goes wrong."

"Jail." Huck shrugged. "Was there once. Law. Whose law? Fawcett's law. Let's have a little o' Heath's law!"

The rancher smiled. "We're both in for the lot, I guess. There'll be a five hundred dollar bonus, if we come out on top."

Huck felt that irritation on his back again and jiffled somewhat. "The money's nice. Hope I live to spend it. What are your men like?"

"Good. You're wondering why I haven't acted for myself." Heath sniffed. "I'm too fat for heroics. My ramrod, Charlie Joad, is too cautious for aught but chasing cows; excellent man though he is. My son, Caleb, got Eastern educated. He doesn't know the ass end of a Colt from the barrel. Ganging needs a leader. Charlie Joad heard you were in Santa Fé and suggested I write you, care of the mail office. It's all worked out, it seems. We've got you here to lead. And in secret."

"Secret!" Huck exploded, his laughter choking through an inhalation of cigar smoke. "Haven't you seen my phys.?"

The rancher frowned. "You mean—?"

"One giant and a kid waitin' for me at the head of Diamond Pass. For me—Huck Callaway; no less! Igor Farson, and Will Besant."

Heath shook his head in anger. "They're both Link Double O men. That means we've got a—talker around."

"Traitor's the word. Somebody with a tongue that licks out Bawley's ear. We'll find him. Give it time."

"But you got here," Heath pointed out. "Did you—?"

Huck shook his head emphatically. "If I'd known then what I know now, I would've. All I did was give Igor the strip like a six foot catfish. The kid—ah! Myra's boy."

Pausing, Huck switched his nose from side to side by muscle control. "That ain't a half bad kid. Lost his daddy, I understand. If Johnno Besant had lived, Will wouldn't be runnin' with a bad string. Pity! Pity! Kid's hell-on-wheels with a cutter. The fastest draw I've ever seen. Faster'n I was at my best. And even Earp preferred to walk wide of me. If Will once killed—that'd be bad. Bad!"

"You're mighty interested in the boy," Heath observed.

"Oh, I dunno," Huck said, rising and walking to the window, where he threw what was left of his cigar into a water-barrel. "The mother, I guess. Loved her. Only woman I've ever loved." His slipped a grubby garter from his pocket and twirled it round his forefinger. "Fancy drawers and silk garters, that's been my kind of gal; and go shares with a thousand and one other guys. Pah!" He stuffed the garter back into his pocket. "Dunno why I'm bleedin' all this off at you. Our business is more box than bustle."

"Myra Besant is a widow," Heath remarked. "And still pretty. But mighty pretty!"

"Sure, Myra is a widow." Huck laughed a little shamefacedly. "And I'm a travellin' man."

The rancher placed a hand lightly on Huck's shoulder. "You are old enough to stop travelling; and still young enough to enjoy the stop."

"I'd give my—" Huck couldn't say what, because there was nothing he wouldn't give—"just to see her again."

"You'll see her," Heath said. "Would you like to wash up and eat?"

Huck gave a short, devil-may-care laugh. "I'd like

that, suh. I figure your whisky is strong on an empty stomach."

Heath showed Huck to the bathroom. It was a fancy job; a genuine importation from the East. There was an enamelled bath a guy could lie down in, and water piped down from a cistern somewhere above. In an alcove adjacent was one of those new-fangled comfort stations, where you pulled a chain and flush water came roaring from all over. Very novel. Huck played steamboat man with the chain while waiting for the bath to fill.

Then he stripped off, and scrubbed himself thoroughly. Next he sought out and annihilated the impertinent flea that had caused him so much irritation. After which he dressed again, sleeked down his hair with some water and, looking half way presentable, returned to Heath's office, where the rancher was now absorbed by his correspondence. "Better?" the big man asked, glancing up.

Huck nodded, and jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "Fancy."

"My son's idea," the cattleman sighed. "The comforts of Boston for the wilds of Kansas. If you'll go along to the kitchen, Mrs Heath has food ready for you."

"Thank you kindly, suh." Huck flipped a salute, and passed along to the kitchen.

Mrs Heath watched his entry with a cold eye. She nodded to a splint-bottomed chair beside the table. Feeling downright uncomfortable, Huck seated himself. "Mighty fine day, ma'am," he tried. An outsize plate was almost thrown in front of him. Its edges were overlapped by a two inch thick steak, which was topped by eight large roast potatoes and a mound of fried onions. Undismayed by the massivity of the meal, Huck started in

with his knife and fork. He kept right on shovelling for the next ten minutes, until a quart sized myg of steaming coffee was splashed in front of him. He had a drink. The coffee was hot, black and very sweet—just how he liked it. He ran his tongue around the inside of his mouth. Then he opined: “Yep, there’s more’n one way o’ killin’ a cat. You can surely kill it with kindness.”

Mrs Heath spun away from the stove. Her ashen lips were working with anger. “Well, hired man?”

Huck lifted his knife. He pretended to put a lot of pressure on the blade while drawing it through the air. “By heck! You can cut it into sizeable chunks, cain’t you?”

“Are you being funny?” Mrs Heath demanded.

“Yes—and no, ma’am,” Huck said. “You ain’t hidin’ that you don’t like me. I’m a guy who likes to have things straight from scratch.”

“You’re a hired gun.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Aren’t you ashamed?”

“No, ma’am.”

“Well, I’m mortally ashamed of my husband for hiring the likes of you. He’s always been honourable; a thorough-going, upright man—a credit to his business and his family. Now he’s turned to—to scum to fight his battles.”

Huck forked beef into his mouth and chewed steadily. “This Flying H, ma’am,” he remarked, his mouth still full, “is a real nice place. I figure, you bein’ a lady an’ all, you’d be sorry to leave it. Mr Heath’s bein’ driven off his land. It aint an open thing. He can’t fight it openly. But if he don’t fight, he’ll go to the wall. The weak always do.”

"I'd rather have a poor good man," came the blazing retort, "than one who's gone to the bad because his worldly possessions are being threatened."

"When was you last poor, ma'am?"

"That's deliberate insolence!"

"Jest a question. Jest a plain ole question."

"Thou shalt not kill!"

"Thou shalt not steal—not no-how."

"Vengeance is—" Mrs Heath broke off, and jerked her head round sharply. The drub of a hard-ridden horse crescendoed towards the back door. Hooves skidded; a rider flung down outside the house. There were running steps, the door burst open—a swarthy, wide-eyed face pushed into view. A knowledge of life-and-death crisis filled the room. Huck shot to his feet. "What's up, man?" he demanded.

The rider gulped for breath, his hands all of a futile flutter.

The solid blunder of Heath's fat legs sounded in the passage. The rancher himself appeared. He wore an expression of profound alarm. "Saw you chasing across the pasture like all hell was after you, Cordy! What ails you, man?"

"It's Klaus Soper, boss," the cowboy croaked. "Dead as a doornail! Shot! And Pot End!"

"Klaus—shot!" the rancher gasped incredulously. "Shot?"

"And Pot End!" the rider repeated.

"What's that?"

"Poison. Surely to God! Beeves down, moanin' and kickin', all round it."

The rancher put out a hand and caught the tabletop, to prevent his collapse. He stared at the window. Then

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his eyes hardened and turned to Huck. "They're turning the screw," he said.

Huck said: "Mr Heath, it's past time I went to work for you."

THREE

THE three men rode for Pot End. Little passed between them. Just enough for Huck to learn from Sol Heath that Cordy Howlett was the ranch segundo, and that their ride would take them about four miles south.

Soon they came to chewed off grass. Here blahing herds drifted, horn and hide subtly changing pigment in the shadow-throw of shifting clouds. Somewhat to the west rose two wooded hills—the Anglos, Huck guessed; for, in the old days, the landmarks had possessed no name. And, of course, Pot End would be the large pool into which their spring water debouched. Already the country dipped towards the crick run of grey stone. Now the underfoot showed brown and bare where hungry cows had gnawed out the grass by its very roots. The sight caused Huck to shake his head grimly. Until the years brought natural re-seeding, or man took a hand, these acres were finished for cattle rearing purposes. It was easy to understand Heath's worry. Before long all the land within smell of water would have been denuded.

Ahead stone outcropped and formed a wide horseshoe reef. The horsemen swung down and carefully crossed

the barrier on foot. Then they mounted again and passed into another slope, beyond which patches of willow and alder quartered a chalk-sided depression where water lay sparkling in the sunlight.

On nearing the pool, a much rutted hoof-run that slanted down to a drinking place came into view. Here three waddies had spaced themselves across the gap and were yelling and shooing at thirsty beeves that were trying to heave over the carcasses of many fallen animals in their efforts to reach water.

"What's it, Joad?" Heath shouted, stepping down ponderously.

The squat, massive bodied man at the centre of the cowboy trio brushed a sleeve across his forehead and called: "Ar-senic, I reckon, Mr Heath. We've lost about thirty head. I shot them what was still a-sufferin' when we rolled up. I've sent Ed Kunz up to the line shack for a reel o' barbed wire. Don't see what we can do but wire the place off and wait for the water to git fit to drink again in process o' time."

Heath nodded briefly. "Klaus Soper?"

The foreman pointed towards a willow brake. "Over there. We ain't touched him. Reckon he got nailed by one of the shots we heard up-country what fetched us runnin'. Klaus musta lit on the b-d what tipped the pisen. Cordy! You took your doggone time, man."

"G'dammit!" the segundo rasped. "Rid like a bat round Bub's griddle."

The black eyes sunken under the foreman's jutting cheekbones explored the narrow gap between Heath and the segundo. He saw enough of Huck to nod a greeting. "That's Huck Callaway, ain't it? Nigh twenty years, Huck. Howdy!"

"Howdy, Charlie. Riz to foreman, huh?"

"Do what I can." Joad wiped his J.B. across the lifting head of a steer and sent it sliding back on to its haunches. "Baccy drummer told me you was in Santa Fé. You got famous over the years."

Huck pulled his ear. "They don't turn out no brass band when I ride in most places. I guess I come here to work, not chew the fat. We'll have us a jaw another time, Charlie. You go on scarin' them cows, and I'll have a peek at that dead man."

"Do that," Heath confirmed. "Be with you shortly, Callaway. I'll just have a look at those dead cows first."

Huck dismounted. He left his reins hanging forward. Then he sauntered over to the willow brake. Klaus Soper was lying face down, an arm tucked under him—bony legs a-sprawl. His Colt was out and lay at his side. Huck picked the weapon up and sniffed the muzzle. The stink of fired powder was still strong. He thumbed aside the loading gate and turned the cylinder. Four chambers had been detonated. "How many shot's you hear, Charlie?" he shouted, across the bellowing of cattle.

"Five—six."

Looked like Soper had fired most of them. "What sort of a hand was Soper with an iron?"

"Bettern' most," Joad bawled. "What else?"

"Let you know."

Huck turned the dead man over. Soper's glazed eyes were half open; his jaw slack and drooling. One hit had done the damage. It had caught him an inch or so left of the heart. He wouldn't had died outright. Then Huck received proof that the man had lingered awhile.

It lay in the shape of a flat white stone, about ten inches square, on which Soper's neck had been resting. There were dark, spidery tracings upon the stone. After giving them a quick glance, Huck straightened the arm which had been bent under the corpse. The nail on the index finger was caked with congealed blood. Obviously, Soper had been trying to leave some sort of message written in his own blood when the final collapse came.

Picking the white stone up, Huck studied its inscribed surface with a concentration that gradually drew his brows into a hairy lump over the bridge of his nose. The squiggly, palsied characters reminded him of an old dame's tangled skein rather than writing. But gradually he made out an R, something that might be an I or a U, a distinct G, and the beginning of a fourth letter that was totally indecipherable. "Charlie!"

"Hello."

"Got a hardcase named Rugs or mebbe Rigg in the local zoo?"

There was a longish pause; then the foreman shouted: "Don't neither name mean nothin' to me."

"Why the names?" Heath asked, walking up and wincing at the sight of his hired man's dead face.

Huck passed the white stone.

The rancher peered closely at the script for about a minute, then shook his head. "Might have been scratched on Lilliput, for all I can make of it. Your eyes are better than mine."

"That don't help much."

Heath entered a hesitant silence that soon bordered on the intense. The conflict of emotion that his face showed ended with: "I wonder—" Then he cut himself short.

"What're you holdin' back?" Huck demanded.

"Just mulling a name. It could be wrong. I don't want to make a heap of unnecessary trouble."

"I'm your troubleshooter," Huck grumbled, trying to clamp down on his temper. And just when he thought he had succeeded, a blaze of fury hit from nowhere and mastered him. "Damn you, Heath! A man lies dead. Your water's been poisoned. There's stiff beef lyin' from hell-to-breakfast. Trouble, be—! You wanna help yourself, you help me. If you're wrong, you're wrong. I'll pick the crow's parson end. Huh?"

The cattleman had blanched before the storm. "You're not overly respectful, are you, Callaway?"

"Once put a spigot in blue blood!" Huck snorted. "Only it turned on red like our peasant stuff. What's that name?"

"Rigset. Mal Rigset. Kudo."

"What about him?"

"He's forty. Real big. Handsome. Will work; won't work. Unreliable. Very fast with a gun or a girl."

"Anythin' known against him?"

Heath shrugged. "He's never been caught."

"What that mean?"

The rancher's shoulders heaved again. "Rigset manages to keep his back pocket well wadded. Steers vanish from time to time. There've been several unsolved robberies in these parts during the last few years. I'm not accusing. I'm just wondering aloud."

Huck slapped his Colt. "Well, suh, I don't have a wonder; I have a know. I know I oughta meet this Mr Rigset. Might even wring a confession from him—allowin' there's one to wring."

"How'll you do that?" Heath asked, tugging his chins

in perplexity. "I don't doubt you're up to beating what you want out of a man. Your type—" /

"Always is," Huck grinned, filling the rancher's embarrassed silence. "Now you're talkin' how your wife'd approve. Sure, I'm a bad boy. It don't worry me. But I ain't been hoss-kicked in the pate. I don't go in for beatin's, less it's to protect myself. Not nothin' rash. I got my methods."

"Sorry, Callaway," Heath said, as if he meant it.

"Forget it," Huck retorted. "Comes with the fifteen hundred you're goin' to unload my way."

"We'll leave it at that."

Huck touched his hat, strode to his horse, shipped the reins and mounted, then swung the beast tightly eastwards, spurring for a gap between the outcropping reef and the hillside greenery. Moving off the grade on to flat going, he curved into a westerly gallop that eventually brought him to the trail that led from Diamond Pass to Kudo. He turned towards town; and after another four miles among swirling grit and streaming sage, he reached the maple girt hollow that contained his destination.

He jogged along the main. Kudo had grown some in the last two decades. It had put on the paint of prosperity, built itself a three storied Hotel Splendide, a pool hall, a theatre—churches, Anglican and Methodist, a first class jail, and a railroad spur. According to old, part scratched bills that had been posted along the walls, the folks had got to voting for mayors, town committees, and peace appointees—not to mention those more exalted personages bound for the Senate. Kudo had got civilization just like drunks sometimes got religion. But

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the cemetery still had a well tilled look, and many of the recently erected headstones named men who had departed this life at a deplorably early age.

Huck dismounted outside the Emporium. He tied his horse, then stomped up the box-wood steps to the building's door and entered. It was cool inside. Smelt of coffee, linen, cheese, and lye. He went up to the counter: to face the little old man who stood under the kerosene lamp—all glasses, wrinkles, and instant civility. Huck bought a bottle of sarsaparilla, which he drank on the spot—"it bein' good for the innards", as he explained—and two striped candy sticks, which he presented to a small, freckle-faced girl wearing plaits and gingham, who happened to be peeping shyly round an inner door. The little old man thanked Huck for this kindly act towards 'my gran'child'; and Huck said 'that tiny one was pretty 'nough to break a whole smart o' hearts afore she was done'. This made relations even more amicable, and Huck was promising to call again when he had a sudden access of memory that caused him to snap his fingers loudly. "Gotta meet a Mr Rigset," he informed the little old man. "Could you direct me, suh?"

At this, the button eyes behind the steel glasses lost some of their sparkle. "That'd be Mal Rigset you want. Ain't but one place he'll be this hour. Candid Katy's saloon. A den of iniquity, sir. No place for a nice gentleman like yourself. Going to be in town long, sir?"

"Shouldn't wonder."

"Then you'll join the Temperance Band, of course. We got seventeen members."

Huck looked suitably impressed. "I'll bang the drum," he promised.

Leaving the Emporium, he walked up the street. A guy couldn't miss Candid Katy's place. It had about an acre of scarlet false frontage, with a burlesque girl painted dead centre. Katy's name stood six feet high above the batwings.

Huck reached the saloon hitch-rail. He idled along the line of mounts tied there. Most of them looked uncomfortably fly-bit, but not too trail weary. But there was one horse, a large sorrel, standing near the top of the rank, that was thickly dusted on the underbelly and had patches of dried lather on its flanks. It had plainly been pushed hard for a spell during recent hours. Then a closer inspection of the mount revealed something that made Huck's mouth tighten. The pommel leather wore a new bullet rip, right down to the oaken centre peg.

Taking out paper and Bull Durham, Huck shook and rolled; then, placing the cigarette between his lips, he felt for a match and shouldered through the batwings. A dance girl, bending at a card table, tight dressed and showing ample upholstery, caught his eye. He rasped the sulphur tip where it did the most good, then lit his smoke. "Thank you, miss," he said, eye twinkling roguishly, as the girl, a raddled blonde, sent puss-eyes darting resentfully over her shoulder. Seeing him, her expression switched from the speculative to the professionally coy.

"Lookin' for a good girl, honey?" she asked.

He quirked an eyebrow and shook his head.

"Lookin' for a naughty girl, then?"

"Always. But not right now." He grinned and walked past her disappointed pout. Another time, perhaps. More fancy drawers and silk garters. He felt suddenly jaded.

What in tarnation! This was Myra's town; her home. A guy sullied his one decent memory by looking twice at that fluff and vanilla hell-cat back there.

He went to the bar and slapped on it. "I'll have a bottle of rye," he told the keeper.

The bottle was fetched and paid for; a glass supplied. But Huck didn't pour. He leaned back with his elbows against the divide and let his gaze slowly circle the crowded bar. He was looking for a big man, handsome, and aged about forty. There wouldn't be too many about answering that description. In fact, there was only one. He was lounging at a corner table. Upon his lap was a be-ribboned Mex girl, her dancer's legs up and kicking. A second female staggered a shot of rye into his glass—after pouring for herself.

Huck trailed his own bottle and glass. He eased among the crowded tables until he reached the corner. "Have a talk with you, Mr Rigset?" he asked, presumptuously hooking up a chair with his toe.

"Don't believe I know you, mister," the other countered churlishly. "Where'd you get my name?"

"Aint you well known hereabouts?" Huck asked innocently.

"I am."

"Well, there." Huck smiled wickedly at the girls. "This is private. Shoo!"

The females scowled and lingered. Rigset showed distinct signs of getting uppity over their dismissal. Then Huck expertly thumbed the cork from his bottle and drank from its spot. He gagged. "Jest like arsenic," he observed significantly.

Rigset gave him a long, searching look, then muttered: "Kay girls. Skidaddle. See you later."

A pair of bustles wagged disrespectfully in Huck's face. The girls wandered off, looking for new birds to pluck.

"Well?" Rigset asked coldly, his large features narrowing to a blue-washed jaw.

"Pot End. That's what they call it, don't they? I saw you from the trees, mister. Whole damn sack of poison. Tut, tut. Thought the waddy had you for sure when that saddle hit nearly tipped you to starboard."

Rigset's colour faded; his eyes lost their arrogance. He ran his tongue around his lips, and snatched his hands into his lap to stop their trembling. Then he made a great effort to recover his composure and partially succeeded. "I don't know what the hell you're talkin' about. You must be drunk. Go away! You've lost me my gals. Now you're spoilin' my drink."

Huck laughed in the man's face. "And you with that run-out sorrel and split pommel! I could tell whoever owns that herd you was out to pisen. Ten words from me would earn you the midnight sky-dance."

"So what do you want?" Rigset snarled, quickly adding: "I ain't admittin' nothing mind!"

"Of course not, friend," Huck agreed expansively. He could now take his tongue out of his cheek. His deductions and guesses had been close enough to the truth to start Rigset thinking in the right direction. He did the hospitable thing and filled the big man's glass. "How I see it's like this. Poisonin' cows is the kind of low chore what gotta have a big motive behind it. Ain't likely a hombre, beggin' your pardon—a hombre like you'd do it on his own account."

"Why not?" Rigset demanded belligerently. "You sayin' I'm too small? I'm more'n your weight."

"You certainly are," Huck soothed. "And you still ain't admitted nothin'. Jest meant, if you'd got a grievance against somebody, you'd have the guts to do a bush-whack job. I can see you got the guts, y'see. Takes one to know another."

"I get it," Rigset said, the arrogance returning to his eyes. "You're up for hire."

"Now," Huck considered, pouring his companion another ounce or two, "we is both talkin' good American."

"You don't drink much," Rigset accused, watching Huck's empty glass.

"It's the buryings," Huck explained cryptically. "They is so awful costly." He leaned across the table and became very confidential. "I'm about broke, pardner. Ten to a plugged nickel you could put me on to a gun job. I got the stink of powerful trouble up my snout-holes. How's about writin' a letter o' introduction to the big boss—jest mentionin' what I happened to notice out at Pot End. And I won't notice it no more."

"Ain't you afraid you know too much?" Rigset demanded.

Huck gave a disarming twinkle. "Ain't there honour among us badmen?"

Rigset sank his whisky. "Have it your way. I'll take a chance of you. What's your name?"

"Henry Allbright." The name trotted out glibly enough.

"He's lyin' clear through the top of his head!" roared a voice from directly behind Huck's chair.

Huck jumped off his seat and spun, jarring to a stop with his back against the wall and his right hand slapping

leather. But Igor Farson was already holding a pistol on him.

Rigset cursed heaven. He started to his feet with a violence that sent the table toppling away from him. Bottles and glasses shattered on the floor. "Who is it?" he raged, showing his teeth.

The bearded Igor spat into a box of sawdust. "I got raised with that copperhead's mistake. He's Huck Callaway."

"That's the—!" Rigset rasped. "You was supposed to—"

Huck smirked. "We met, didn't we, Iggy? And it was jest like old times. I give you the measles."

"Why you, b-d!" Farson seethed. "I'm gonna do here an' now what I didn't." A rough thumb dragged the hammer tongue.

"Forget it, Igor!" Rigset interrupted, his eyes now merciless. "Put your gun away. You had your chance and muffed it. This guy was leadin' me up the gooseberry trail. Don't no man do that. He's mine."

Huck borrowed the cigarette that drooped from the mouth of a wide-eyed onlooker. He took a long drag and inhaled deeply, then returned the twirly to its owner's lips. Smoke V'd from his nostrils and gushed greyly from his throat. "You wouldn't be thinkin' of gunnin' me in a public place, would you, Rigset? I hear Kudo has a kind of spavined law arrangement, but even so—"

"I ain't goin' to do it that-a-ways," Rigset snorted contemptuously. "Don't have to. I'm going to take my pleasure watchin' you fumble your iron as my slugs reach you."

"Fair shake from a low-down cow poisoner?" Huck

asked in amazement. "Ah! Pride! Fast with gun and gal. Think you're unbeatable. That's jake with me. Straight draw-and-shoot."

Mal Rigset looked round the hushed bar. His thumb turned slowly towards Huck. "Anybody want to shake hands with a dead man?"

FOUR

HUCK stepped into Rigset's long shadow as they entered the street. He moved off the boardwalk and turned left. Rigset went to the right. By mutual consent they halted, when about twenty feet apart, and faced each other.

Some change in the atmosphere travelled the length of the street. Folk scuttled off the sidewalk, a horse shied—a dog fled under the raised floor of a warehouse and peeped out, nose end glistening wetly. The silence became ugly; motes swirled grittily in a breeze tremor. Passing cloud shadow darkened the shapeless faces squashed against window-glass. Hill thunder grumbled.

Huck watched his opponent. Rigset's shoulder flinched. They drew and fired. Rigset fell instantly.

It was mostly like that. A man felt dazed by the speed of it all. But that was normal, too. Trailing his smoking sixgun, Huck walked up to the fallen man and turned him over with a toe. Rigset had been hit slightly off centre. He wasn't quite gone. Huck compressed his lips and waited for the departure. You could grow used to anything—except taking life.

Then a gun boomed from Candid Katy's doorway. Huck felt the pluck of a bullet at his shirt. He crouched and swung round. An enraged Farson was ready to fire

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again. Huck dived sideways and down, rolling rapidly across the street, bullets chasing him through the flying dust. Then his back hit the boardwalk and stayed him. Still lying more flat than otherwise, he blasted at Farson from a distorting angle. The giant flung up his gun arm and, beard wagging, toppled backwards between the batwings. He lay with legs protruding from the gap under the door that flapped above him. But very slowly, though of their own volition, the limbs withdrew; so it didn't look as if Farson had taken a killing slug.

Huck rose shakily. He brushed himself off and wondered if he should enter the saloon and finish the botched shooting. But just then he became aware of a woman's shape bending over Mal Rigset. "Ain't no use, ma'am," he mumbled, wondering if, to cap it all, Rigset had had a wife and family.

The woman looked round. Her angry eyes met Huck's. The shock to him was worse than a bullet hit. "God'n heaven—Myra!" he gasped.

There was no answering shock in her gaze. "I saw you, Huck Callaway," she rapped. "Nigh twenty years haven't changed you any."

"I—"

"He's still alive. Help me."

Myra was strong. She had already lifted Rigset's legs off the ground. And there was a power in her that compelled obedience. He raised the dying man's shoulders. Together, their burden sagging between them, they staggered a dozen steps to the open door of a street-side house. "In here," the woman said.

They got Rigset over the threshold, and Huck kicked the door to behind them. "It's plain useless," he said, as they placed the inert shape on a carpet before the fire-

place. He knelt and found Rigset's wrist pulse. It petered out under his touch. He sighed, shook his head, and rose laboriously. "Did he mean somethin' to you, Myra?"

Myra's gaze met his frankly. "As much as any man who's shared a woman's supper. Oh! Why aren't you down with the devil, where you belong, Huck Callaway?"

He looked into the all white, chestnut fringed face, with its clean, well-spaced features and kissable mouth—a face that had seen thirty-six years but showed no more than the first twenty-six of them. How that face hated him; and not without cause. And he was hurt.

He was hurt! He—Huck Callaway. The guy with the ever-ready retort. The guy with a skin like a rhino's. The guy nobody bested. He was hurt. "Myra," he said, head hanging, "I guess I'm so far worse'n awful the devil don't want me 'cos he's plain jealous. I wish—please believe me!—that Rigset had got me just now."

"So do I."

The hurt was unbearable. The extra pain drove Huck clear through humility and depression, and back to his normal self. "What in blue blazes did you see in him?" he demanded. "That guy weren't jest bad—he was dirty!"

"There was good in him!"

"Oh, ho!" Huck chortled brutally, slapping a knee. "I ain't changed. You ain't changed. Same old Myra. Same as you was at eighteen. Tryin' to reform the bad 'uns. Lay my last breath that hellion Rigset's been making a fust class monkey outa you! What'd you read him Scripture and feed him plumb cake? He'd've suffered that for what he was after."

"Were you any better?"

He snatched his eyes to the floor. He could feel hot

colour mounting into his cheeks. "I jest couldn't take no more of it that—that last afternoon."

"You took something else—fiddlefoot!"

He swore. "I know you was a—. But you was real willing!"

"I loved you."

"I loved you!"

"Didn't you prove it—fly-by-night!"

He screwed up that misused hat in an awkward self-defence, then grumbled: "Aw, you come out of it a woman."

"I came out of it a woman," she agreed flatly. "And that's how Johnno Besant took me."

"It's a bygone."

"Some bygones are never bygone. You're not talking to a dreamy eyed girl now, Huck Callaway. You're talking to a woman. A woman who's seen too much of men and their ways!"

"You sure ain't no girl!" he raged back, shocked yet somehow not caring that they stood quarrelling in the presence of the dead. "You're too damned sour to be much more'n a squeezed out old shrew!" The blood was hammering in his temples, and his forefinger was wagging masterfully. "I'll tell you somethin' else. Once, for all, an' final. I loved you at eighteen, I loved you at twenty-eight—and at thirty-eight, I still love you. And if you'd gotten to be sourer'n all the lemons God ever put sourness into, I'd still love you. And I hate to tell you. So there!"

Myra looked stunned. "Huck," she said, "you're crying."

He had another swear. "I g'damn ain't. I jabbed my g'damn thumb in my g'damn eye!"

"Always had to spoil everything, didn't you?" Myra observed resentfully. "Mr Magic—with the cracked wand!"

"Where're you keepin' your broomstick?"

"I'll get to slapping in a minute."

"Ho, ho—ho!" he warned. "You do that. Only I slap back. Been slappin' slappin' gals for fifteen years—and I'm awful good at it!"

"You haven't changed a bit!" Myra declared in mortal exasperation.

He pretended to turn the handle of a hurdy-gurdy. "Here we go again!"

Then a door slammed at the back of the house. Running steps approached the room. A door opposite Huck flew open. Young Will Besant came panting in. Excitement showed on features that were black with bruises and split by cuts. Myra cried out at the sight of him. But the boy ignored the sound and, after a single glance at Rigset's corpse, fixed his gaze on Huck. "It's Farson!" he panted.

"Iggy dead?"

The boy brushed the question aside. "Nah," he gabbled. "Jest shoulder-hit. He's gone to the sheriff. Dindyke an' a dep. is comin' after you."

Huck's mouth crimped. Bought law. Law bought out by his enemies. That's why it hadn't interfered so far. He'd get some justice from *that*. Like as not a moonlight bust-out and the heave-ho over the nearest bough. Time to get—but pronto!

Squeezing the boy's thin shoulder, Huck said: "I thank you, sonny. I'll run get my hoss."

"You don't have the time. Your hoss's outside the Emporium, ain't it? Least, I thought I see'd it there."

"That's where."

"You'll be lookin' clear up Lars Dindyke's .44 as you heads for it."

"'n idea?"

"Take my nag. It's out back. Ain't right up to your weight, but it's no bad runner."

"Okay, boy." He strode towards the door leading to the rear of the house; then, on an uncontrollable impulse but without turning, asked: "Why?"

"Y'cared enough to say so."

"Iggy do that to your face after he come to?"

"Yeah."

"Next time," Huck rasped, with a jungle ferocity like he'd never before experienced and couldn't give a reason for, "I'll kill Iggy for sure. Look after that salty ma o' yourn, son. So long."

Then he leaped across the kitchen and was away through the back door. He saw a light boned grey gelding hitched to a mite of picket. The horse was certainly not made for his one-ninety, but it was young and hadn't been sweated. He broke the hitch and stepped up, after which he drew right rein and applied his spurs. The grey went down the back lots at a fine clip. Huck jinked round the rubbish dumps and ducked a line of washing. Then he angled between some derelict shacks and joined the trail leading out of town.

Almost at once, a great hail went up at a distance behind him. He didn't look round, but sank his face towards the grey's mane. A rifle cracked. The slug passed at the edge of audibility. Other weapons joined in the firing. Lead droned all around. The hills up front rolled back the metallic echoes. Then Huck moved beyond even a long gun's range, and the shooting ceased.

Now he glanced back. There was much frantic toing and froing in mainstreet. Men were gesturing; horses pranced. A posse was forming swiftly. Give the riders a minute more and they'd be after him. This was one of those occasions when knowing the country was going to be a mighty big help.

Huck lashed criss-cross with the reins, but spared the rowels. Steel could wait its need. He crowded into a grade. The grey didn't like his extra weight on the climb; it snorted and chucked its head a little. Saliva spilled from a sloppy lip. A sign of fatigue already. This in two or three miles. He took another peep over his shoulder. The posse lay at the limit of his vision. It was hard to tell if it had gained ground as yet. Then five minutes more of galloping, and a third look back. No mistaking the law party's gain this time. It amounted to upwards of two hundred yards. Well, he couldn't rely upon his horse to save him; so he'd have to attempt a foxy evasive action. A plan was dawning in his mind.

The going grew steeper yet. It wound into the real crags, where boulders that were big as castles heaped under soaring precipices, beyond which scarp and coll stabbed blackly against the sky.

The grey's pace laboured away almost to nothing. Though regretting the need, Huck began using the rowels. The horse spurted resentfully in answer to the pain. A steep, rock-overhung corner drew on. Far to the rear a rider tried a shot. The clanging reverberations bit around the heights and set rock fragments tumbling into a minor avalanche.

Huck rounded a corner. He was now hidden from his pursuers. Another two hundred yards he covered. A ragged cleft showed in the rock wall on his left. He

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turned into it. Below him wound a descent that was crazily steep to make from the saddle. But a dismount would rob him of the vital minutes he was trying to gain; so he forced the grey downwards. The animal slipped, slewed, and skidded: head up, head down—rear legs tucked awkwardly under its barrel; yet it somehow retained its footing even where the way lay jagged and glazed in the dimmest narrows.

The path down turned right among shoulder-high slabs of stone. The footing levelled somewhat. Staying the shudder of over-worked chest muscles, the horse snorted with evident relief. Now a vista of grass and dense treetops opened beyond the descent. Crag shadow cast by the westering sun emphasized the quiet of the place—also its fine possibilities as a bolt route for a hard pressed man; for, some miles to the east, the forest broke against the base of a small divide, behind which lay draw and brush country that folded prairie-wards in a maze of natural hideouts. To reach such terrain seemed the obvious goal of any fugitive. At least, Huck hoped Sheriff Dindyke would gauge it so.

For he had no intention of entering the forest. Instead, nearing the end of the down-grade, where the rock north of him ceased its vertical soar and sank earthwards in a savage hack of spires, fangs, and misshapen hummocks, he stepped from the saddle and led his horse behind some massive boulders and into a cave-like cleft where the shadow amounted to darkness. He drew his Colt and reloaded the two fired chambers, then leaned against the rock and waited.

About four minutes passed. He heard the hasty yet checked scramble of approaching men and horses. He hadn't expected the posse to be deceived by his departure

from the high trail. Its members were as familiar with the locality as he. They would have been expecting his switch into country where sign could be more easily confused. But this was the testing time. Would anybody present anticipate his intended double-back? Lawmen knew all the tricks; and the average posseman wasn't a fool.

He used his left hand to cover the mouth and nostrils of his horse, lest any sound from it should carry to the path. Then he listened for word or movement that would warn of his ruse having been discovered. He thought the thunder of his heart must be audible for a mile, and each breath seemed to leave his nostrils like a hurricane gust.

The tension passed its crisis. The rattle of boot and hoof among the detritus passed on; faded—was swallowed by the silence of the rocks. Huck gave it five or ten minutes. The posse should now be into the forest and beyond sight of the ascent to the high trail. Best make sure. Huck catfooted to a point of visibility and looked towards the trees. Not a man or beast was in sight.

Returning to his horse, Huck led the animal back to the narrow path and began the long, hard climb to its source. Sweat trickled from his temples and his feet and ankles ached, by the time he again reached level stone. Remounting now, he progressed to the upper rock-line, where the trail defiled and brought him to a full view of the Link Double O grassland. Crescent fire burned over the lambent radiance that stole from behind the dark blue of sundown nimbus. Cattle, thousands of them, lowed the symphony of the plains, and the meadow lark on its evening dip added a liquid vocal. A promise for the morrow grew against the west.

Huck drew rein and, for a moment, pondered bit-

terly. Here was all any man could wish. Earth, sky, peace—plenty. And it belonged to Bawley Fawcett. Yet he wanted what his neighbour possessed. Worse; had shown that he meant to have it. How mad could you get? Huck turned his eye skywards. "Mister, I don't wonder You get somewhat riled up from time to time!"

Then Huck rode off the broad mile of a scree slope and, meeting the graze, turned southwards and headed for the hogsback divide between Link Double O and the Heath range.

Purple had enriched the dusk when he entered a small valley that lay beneath the climbing stone. He approached dwarf cottonwoods, willows, and sycamores. Sweet smelling foliage brushed around him. His body was relaxed but his mind still alert. The nicker of a horse came from a short distance up front. He drew in—listened intently; there was no other sound; but, still unsure as to whether or not new danger lay ahead, he dismounted and jerked his Colt. Pussyfooting again, he moved among the trees until he reached a glade bordered by willows. He softly parted some of the frond-like greenery. He saw two horses grazing and, near them, a young couple locked in a passionate embrace.

Huck exhaled in relief. He put up his gun and grinned. Good luck to 'em! Stepping back, he started to withdraw from the foliage, but a lowering heel snapped a twig. The sound broke shot loud upon the sylvan hush. The young people whirled apart. Their faces, dimly but still clearly visible, swung towards him—tense and startled. The girl's face was plump and small-featured, sensuous—strong; the young man's tall from eyebrow to hairline, big-eyed, loose-mouthed, over-trusting—timid.

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"Pardon me, folks," Huck apologised.

But the couple leapt to their horses, swung into their saddles, and spurred for the trees opposite. In five seconds flat, they had disappeared.

"Now what'n hell was that about?" Huck demanded.

FIVE

STILL perplexed by the run-rabbit behaviour of the lovers, Huck led the grey down the glade and reached the foot of the hog'sback. He started to thread his way up a boulder slope, but a stumble by the horse, and a fall of his own, convinced him that he'd do well to await moonrise before attempting to climb higher over loose and brittle surfaces that went unseen in the twilight. No point in risking injury to himself or his mount for want of a little patience. He felt reasonably secure. The posse was almost certainly miles away, like as not chasing its own tail. True, the youngsters had seen him, or knew that he was in the vicinity—for he doubted that they had seen his face clearly among the leaves—but the apparent furtiveness of their relationship didn't suggest that either would do much yapping about what he or she had discerned in the valley. Yes, he could dismiss the couple as any sort of threat. So he ground-tied the grey, made himself comfortable in the lee of a rock, built a smoke, and enjoyed an hour or two's rest.

The moon rose large and unobscured. Its radiance capped the crags with silver, lit eerie facets along the sprawling slopes, and brought a slow-pervading glimmer to the breeze shifted foliage below. "How're y'doin",

hoss?" Huck inquired, rising and stretching. "Ready to hunt us a way over that stone pile?"

The animal wasn't a keen mover. It answered his steady pull on the lead rein with an occasional snatch of its head. They plodded to the stoop of the hogsback without mishap. Huck had been hoping for a straightforward passage down the other side, but was disappointed. The crown of the formation had rifted laterally and, while on the near side the split sloped gently enough to its limit, on the far side it rose vertically and made a crossing impossible at that point.

Giving vent to a single curse of annoyance, Huck turned eastwards and passed along the caprock in the hope that the fissure would come together again or its character change; but, varying in small degree only, the same difficulty persisted until a point was reached where tier upon tier of indrawing stone thickened the hogsback to a more mountainous aspect and the crack finally disappeared where harder stone flung precipices off the Flying H side of the formation and still put descent out of the question.

The situation placed Huck in a quandary. The farther he followed the heights eastwards, the more likely that he would ultimately descend into an area where the posse might still be hunting him. Conversely, return to the spot at which he had first climbed the hogsback would require either that he retrace his earlier ride from Kudo—again with the danger of meeting the posse on the eastern prairie fringe—or that he ride Link Double O grass for a large part of the night and circle the divide about the hour the moon set. But from this course of action another risk could arise. Overnight, the posse was going to realize that it had been fooled. Come dawn, it

would probably sweep westwards. He could very well run slap-dab into the middle of it. Didn't matter much how the coin fell, he could lose.

This being so, a key to the problem suggested itself. The dam blasted by Bawley Fawcett must lie but a short distance farther east. He, Huck, had to take a look at it sometime soon. Might as well be tonight—by moonlight; so he kept moving ahead.

The rock area went on spreading. Its upper levels dipped from an undulating ruggedness to a parabolic decline that ended in a natural duct where water boomed and spray frosted in the moonbeams. Step by easy step, Huck walked his horse over the ancient wind-polished surfaces beneath them. They moved in line with the watercourse. A quarter mile more and he came upon what he sought—a mound of boulders and shattered stone that filled the duct and piled a twenty feet high block into some narrows that were situated quite near the spot from which the flow had formally cascaded on to Sol Heath's property. Now the water eddied against the barrier, swirled to a considerable height at its distant corner, then surged blackly over the duct rim and poured into dropping shadows where its moon-tipped foaming dribbled into tiny points of light and disappeared, though a far-off booming remained.

Huck studied the dam awhile, his gaze lifting to the remnant of a mighty overhang from which dynamite had torn the pile's content. Weight and the lie of the stone had been on the side of the blasters. The block must be formed by several hundred tons of granite. To shift it again, with explosives, and without bringing down the remainder of the mass above, would be a major engineering job. In fact, it couldn't be safely brought

off by one explosion. The answer was in using a series of small charges and a gang of pick and shovel men. Huck spat. He'd once heard a sailor describe an iceberg's chances of survival in a furnace. Workmen would operate up here with about the same odds against their success. The poor hellions would be slashed to bits by Link Double O's gunfire.

That was that, then. How did you go back to your boss and tell him that the task he'd set you just couldn't be accomplished? Especially when the man needed this water about as much as he needed his next breath. The truth was, Bawley Fawcett had made himself absolute master of the situation—short of Flying H hiring an army of guns and hitting Link Double O off an extermination ride. Action that hideously final, Sol Heath would never dream of taking—even if the Federal riders would let him get away with it; which they wouldn't. No. Heath was a ruined man. He would have to accept it.

Huck left the grey with reins dangling, and began walking towards the dam. He was back with his own immediate problem. Perhaps the pile could be crossed and he and the horse reach Flying H grass by descending the old watercourse. He felt thoroughly depressed as he neared the dam. From somewhere behind him came the grate of metal against stone. He carelessly ascribed the sound to a hoof movement on the part of his horse. Even when the noise repeated he took no notice of it. Only when his ear caught the easing of a Winchester ejector did his jaded senses react. His hand started to his sixgun.

"Push 'em high!" a voice rasped.

"Hell with that!" Huck dived sideways, completed his

draw and, twisting left, fired at the black shape behind the flame that lanced at him. Lead warmed the seat of his breeches. But he thought he'd got his man; for the other dropped instantly to knee height. Then he learned his mistake. A slug tore the pistol from his grasp. An agonising partial numbness coursed up his right arm. He cried out but, still in full possession of his wits, he spun towards the lost weapon and grabbed it with his left hand. The gun was still cocked, a surprising fact when the tremendous jarring it had received was taken into account. Huck aimed again, missiles shrilling around him. He squeezed the trigger. The hammer didn't fall. He pressed harder—jerked. There was a rasping and a roar. The Colt almost kicked out of his grip. His bullet missed its target by six feet. He spun again, writhed, twisted; tried to re-cock his weapon. But all the strength of his thumb couldn't shift the hammer. And in that terrifying second he realized what had happened. The Colt's cylinder had taken the hit and been wrenched off centre, probably snapping the spindle. Now the trigger tongue was locking against frozen metal. The gun was useless for all but—. A bullet burned through the shirt-slack under Huck's armpit. He knew instinctively that the next shot *must* get him. So he reversed the sixgun and hurled it at the rifleman with all his strength.

The pistol struck the enemy as the Winchester crashed again. The diverting blow came at the vital moment. Huck heard the slug fizz wide of him. He gathered to throw himself at the winded adversary—feeling that the guy's condition about made up for his own still far from mobile right arm. But as he rose, livid fire shafted at him from a small mound about sixty yards distant. Metal plunked into the water under the dam.

Then a scatter-gun erupted. To judge from the flare of it, the excited owner had triggered off both barrels at once. Mercifully, he had fired from a range far beyond the effective. The heavy buckshot charges spread and whistled by. Huck sprang upright. It had started as man to man. Now it seemed that he had three adversaries. He heard boots scraping and grinding towards him; saw grotesque shadows seemingly afloat on the rockland. He began to run, stumbled—his mind was all racing confusion, with sweat breaking coldly on his back and brow. He reached the dam pile. Bullets again flew about him. Hoarse in throat and salt-blinded, he stabbed his fingertips into shifting stone and clawed his way upwards. There was that instant of standing limned against the sky. Then he dived recklessly forward, hard stone scoring his chest and rumbling beneath him. To the bottom he came; head-over-heels he went. He saw a myriad stars, and pain induced hysteria set him raging and babbling. His true vision fogged. He could no longer think at all. He crawled, he lifted, he flung forward—he flinched, tottering, from the brink of a sheer fall. He gazed a moment at the filmy moonshine of the beetling depths; then, with a despairing moan, turned and faced what must be.

A-top the barrier debris, a rifleman stood, weapon pointing. Huck saw and heard nothing, but felt the world-splitting strike of the bullet against his head. Surely his brain had ripped to either edge of the universe? He began falling. His fingers grabbed, touched rock, slipped away impotently. The fall became a hurtle that checked almost at once in a bone-slamming collision that brought a sensation of floating and a low-pitched musical hum to his ears. For a blissful moment there was peace.

But the peace was broken when a voice from no place in particular said: "Swear t'Steven I got him right between the eyes! Iff'n I didn't—waal, that drop's two hundred foot and some."

"'Nough by itself," another speaker agreed. "Who was the critter?"

"Nary a notion. Flyin' H man; that's for sure. Must've come in from the hogsback."

"Who'd've thought. Still, it's natural old Sol'd have at least a try. Wonder he ain't tried before. Say"—there was sudden inspiration in the voice—"wouldn't have been that top gun the boss said Heath'd sent for?"

"Coulda bin," the first speaker observed. "Weren't Iggy Farson and the kid set to get him over at Diamond Pass?"

"Iggy. That guy loves a nice juicy killin'. Mebbe he fouled up. Big'n awkward!"

There was a nasty laugh. "Sure; but don't say it to his face. He ain't that awkward. Trouble is, we get such a mite o' news up here."

"You'd think we was fixin' to bring off hen fruit."

"Would that. Reckon somebody's gotta guard this doggone corner, though. How's Bill? Was croakin' like he needed boxin' when I passed him."

"Aw, he got pumped out when them bits an' pieces down there heaved a Peacemaker at him. All fuss-an'-pothor, that's Billy. He'll live."

"Pity! I ain't wore my funeral duds lately."

There was more laughter; then two sets of footfalls receded.

Despite the dialogue to which he had listened, it dawned on Huck only slowly that he was still alive—and then he wished he were dead. For the brain that he

had supposed completely smashed up seemed to occupy the place it normally occupied and to be doing service as a big bass drum. From its pounding beat, combers of agony surged to his extremities and back again. He twitched an arm, a leg; moved two arms and two legs. Arched his back and neck. Then he concentrated what remained of his will and energy into a single movement. He sat up. The torturer at the drum let rip in good and earnest! Huck groaned, and gently fingered a flesh deep groove along the side of his skull. He used every swear word he knew—front, back, and sideways. After that, he felt considerably better.

Soon he let the fingers of his left hand explore away from his body. At a distance of a very few inches they passed into empty space. It was as he had supposed; he was lying upon a ledge—and a narrow one at that. He peered up, his sight clearing, and saw the outward curve of the cliff-edge from which he had fallen about fifteen or twenty feet above. No doubt his last frantic grab at the stone had swung his body far enough inwards to meet the jut of the ledge. Then the overhang had made his position invisible to the men looking downwards. On the face of it, he had been remarkably fortunate.

But there was a deeper and disconcerting truth. Getting off the ledge would probably cost him the life that had been so luckily preserved. The rock between him and the clifftop looked about as unclimbable as any he had ever seen. And even if he performed the miracle of ascent, the guards would still be about the place. He should have considered the virtual certainty of guards being present from the first. Fawcett would have more sense than to leave his dam unwatched. But he, Huck,

would find no profit in condemning his lack of forethought now. He was on the ledge. He couldn't climb up, and he couldn't stay where he was—for several obvious reasons; best of which was that the gunmen would spot him at sunup—so he'd have to climb down: two hundred feet of sheer, moonlit rockface. And that was quite a chore for a guy to set himself.

He did his best to clamp down on a rebellious imagination. Gingerly, he faced about on his precarious perch. His knee-joints absorbed the sharp lip-stone, and his hands tried to locate trustworthy holds near them. He made a small slip, teetered backwards—had to tip himself strongly forward to regain his balance. The back of his head cracked against rock and created another series of drumbeats. He let the pain pass, and then began to wonder. To wonder why the back of his skull had made contact with stone when the forward-driving brow hadn't. An insignificant detail; a freak of the incident? Perhaps. He pushed a hand directly before him. It made no contact with rock, but passed on into a hole. He grunted, and felt around. The space was a big one. Dammit! He'd risk striking a match. Fumbling out a sulphur tip, he struck and, leaning over the tiny flame, watched its glow spread into a long, two feet high cavity that ran parallel with the ledge. He thrust the match right into the aperture and saw its light reflect off stone flooring. A black void fanned beyond the upper radiance.

The match burned down to Huck's fingertips and went out. He hardly noticed the pain from his seared skin. His imagination had important ideas to develop now. The rock adjacent was partly hollow; perhaps riddled with caves. Where caves were, unexpected ways to the ground or higher rock might be found. He thought he

would be wiser to trust himself to the darkness within the aperture rather than to the thousand moon-glossed treacheries of the descent beneath him.

Stretching himself to full length upon the ledge, he slithered sideways into the cavity and lay trembling upon the floor beyond. He rose very slowly to his feet. There was headroom and, as an upraised hand assured him, plenty to spare. He struck a match. Shadows writhed around him. Grotesque limestone shapes bulked to the right of him and dripped monotonously. Stalactite and stalagmite reached for one another in the age old desire to unite. Huck crept forward. The match died. Pellets of icy water burst through his thin clothing. The floor tilted upwards. He followed it blindly. Then, in an instant of panic, he looked back. The moonlit entry slit had vanished. Somewhere, unknowing, he had turned a corner; perhaps a number of corners. He was lost in the cold blackness. The pimples of gooseflesh rose on his arms, and the dripping water sent out sinister, chuckling echoes. A stalactite raked his shoulder; another barred his path and snapped under sudden pressure. Its stony length went jangling down a slope, the echoes ranging like a cackle of insane laughter.

Huck could stand it no longer. He began to understand why ancient man had worshipped the sun. What was the human creature without light? He ripped another sulphur tip to fire. The grey fanged, splashing underworld seemed to leap in upon him. Claustrophobic nightmare made him sweat and shiver. He fired match after match, many shaking out in his tremulous fingers at the birth of light. He wished with an indescribable intensity that he had stayed under the moon; tackled the cliff descent—broken his neck. No fate could be worse than

wandering in this dreadful place where the inanimate seemed to become a form of alien life.

He began to rummage feverishly through his pockets. A minute passed as the search cycle repeated. Then a new panic rocked him. He'd done it; he had struck his last match. Fool that he was, he'd let his wild need for light bring him to its final absence. He leaned against a cold, unseen projection, subduing unspeakable torments of the mind. By degrees, he quieted and his courage returned. He began edging forward again. Soon a low rumbling came to his ears. He shook his head, thinking the trouble must be inside it. But this wasn't so. Ten paces more, and the rumble had become a roar—a great, tumbling rush of waters passing a thin stone wall immediately before him. He reached out with both hands, brushed a sodden surface—felt his boots splashing through a welt-deep seepage. Then, way up on his left, he saw light; wonderful moonlight; enough of it to promise a way out—if he could once climb that high.

Powered by relief, he went at niche and cranny, knob and spur, with a spider-like vigour that, five minutes previously, he would have believed he no longer possessed. The dark seemed no hindrance to his inspired ascent. Even when he slipped, he brought a clinging roughness to skin and clothing, and made his bones indent to the shaping of the wall. What matter if he bled from scraped palms and knees and nose? High he went, and higher yet—until his straining fingers scrabbled into the exit and fastened on stone tusks which they found there. He drew himself upwards, biceps bulging, swung a leg into the open, heaved his crutch to a digging, painful perch; then, dizzy from exertion, reeled outwards and, before he could recover his balance, plunged headlong

towards water that flowed swiftly about thirty feet below him.

The chill of immersion was momentarily paralysing. He sank a long way before touching bottom and starting upwards. He spluttered and coughed as he broke surface. Then he flailed with arms and legs and kept himself afloat while the current sent him swirling along the duct that he had earlier followed with his horse. The flow swept him round a bend. A black surface speeded before him. Moonbeams were hazily rock-trapped about a yard above it. The dam pile rushed to meet him as he spluttered from an unexpected ducking. Then the current surged, heaved, met the back-flow from the packed stone and pushed him under again. He fought powerfully to get his nose above water. He clutched a projecting spur, and tried to anchor his grip firmly enough to lift himself ashore. But the ceaseless buffet of the flood nullified his efforts. He felt himself weakening. His hands started to slip. In utter despair, he saw himself rolling at last, stark and bloated, in some far off backwater. He shut his eyes as his fingers gave out altogether; but in the same instant—like an answer to an unspoken prayer—a hand wound into his collar and pulled him clear of the current. Then a second dug under his left armpit and he felt himself being dragged to safety over the edge of the watercourse. Another tug and he lay on his side, spitting water and gasping. But the respite was brief. For he was jerked to his feet and held upright by the strength of two thick arms. A fat, whiskery face, full of grinning menace, pressed right into his own; and stinking breath hit his nostrils as his rescuer roared: "Billy Wesley!"

"What's it, Sam?" the summoned man demanded grumpily, from a distance.

"Jest caught me a ghost. You come and see."

Nailed boots made their clattering approach. Huck's deliverer released him and stepped back, Colt drawn. It needed all Huck's concentration to stay upright, but he made it. He tried to glare defiance at the lanky individual whose scrawny neck now pushed vulture-hideous features out of the night.

"Don't you believe in ghosts?" Sam jeered.

Wesley answered briefly. "Nope."

Then his fist crossed suddenly and knocked Huck back to the rock.

SIX

HUCK stayed down. He might have struggled up and gone on being big and brave. But his head had taken enough punishment for one night, and he could see that his assailant was longing for a chance to floor him again. "That's for throwin' that g'damn pistol at me!" Wesley snarled. "I've a mind to kick your face off!"

There was a click as Sam's hammer rose to the cock. "Want me to put it all right, Bill?" he asked.

"What you sons o' goats about down there?" came a strident demand from the pile of boulders that lay under a corner of the overhang.

"You got too many teeth, Lol!" Wesley declared in reply. "Got that pork and beans ready for supper?"

The unseen Loll made an impolite remark about the correct feeding place for men of Wesley's appetite. "You can eat when you want," he added. "Now what's what?"

"You can't shoot."

"Like blazes, I can't!" A burly figure clumped out of the rocks, almost tripped headlong in his haste—uttered an obscenity—then joined the company at a shambling limp. "You may be in charge up here, Bill Wesley," he panted resentfully, "but you bin gettin' too uppity by half. I'm goin' to thump your snout if you don't bite

that strip of vinegar soaked jerky you keep poppin' from your jaws!"

"You and the whole Fifth Cavalry!" Wesley jeered. "Your shootin' is worse'n your cookin', and your cookin's worse'n awful. Here's proof! Hit him between the eyes, did you? Swear t'Steven, y'did! Well, old Steve must be awful cross at gittin' his name took in vain."

"'Taint the same guy!" Loll snarled aggrievedly. "Mine went over the cliff."

"'Tis, too. He musta got hung somewhere and clum up again. Then I guess he went and fell in the water and I had to fish him out."

"Ain't so."

"No other way it could be!" Wesley snorted. "You only creased the cuss. See?"

"Want me to put it right, Bill?" Sam repeated.

"Lemme!" Loll raged, tugging a Remington off a cross draw.

"Put the Remmy up!" Wesley ordered. "You ain't fit for hoss-slaughterin'. Lay two bits to ten bucks you couldn't blow the b-d's brains out from five inches. You go and fill my plate. Now git—afore I centres my toe up your butt!"

"I warned—"

"Git!"

The two men glared at one another. But it was Loll who broke in the brief battle of wills. He slunk back towards the rocks, making the worst possible assertions about Wesley's parentage.

"Want me to put it right, Bill?" issued Sam's one-track chant.

Huck took a deep breath—and held it. He could see the question mark behind Wesley's twisted ugliness. For

an instant it seemed to be all over. Wesley's head jerked, then quickly changed to a shake. "What's your name?" he demanded of his captive.

Huck made his thoughts zig and zag through this desperate course and that. The men above him were Link Double O employees. The boss of Link Double O had given orders for his extermination. If he gave his correct name, the slim chance that he might survive a while longer could be instantly taken from him. On the other hand, these men were gunhawks rather than cowhands, and as he was a nationally known top gun—and these guys most likely respected speed at hitting the iron more than anything else—they'd possibly hesitate to murder one of the lords of their own profession once they knew who he was.

A boot in the ribs informed Huck that Wesley was short on patience. The anger he felt at this latest coward stroke decided him to play himself—and in the grand manner. "Keep your g'damn boot to yourself, small-fry!" he sneered. "Name's Callaway. Huck Callaway. Gimme a gun, and I'll drop all three of you together, before any one's cleared leather. Now ain't that a fair offer?"

Whatever Wesley's feelings may have been, Sam was certainly impressed. "We did wonder about it, Bill," he said in tones that held respect. "It is the top gun Sol Heath sent for, then. He must've got by Igor and the kid."

"Don't prove so much. Iggy ain't all that!"

"He's less now," Huck rasped, suspecting that the contemptuous talk he'd heard about Farson was really a blind for the fear in which the giant was held on Link Double O. "I beat his brains out, and put a slug where it didn't do him no good."

"Hah!" Wesley exclaimed spitefully. "Did you now. I'd've been pleased to see that."

"Me, too," said Sam avidly, voice and expression readily confirming Huck's suspicion.

"He was ape-ugly before," Huck elaborated. "But even the jungle-hangers wouldn't own him now."

Sam laughed. Despite his itchy trigger-finger, he was evidently a half way friendly soul. "You gone and hired in on the wrong side, Callaway. What'd you want to go and join up with old Sol for?"

Huck shrugged. If he played this right—"Job's a job, boys. Trade's scarce. It's all the law we got in this here Union. Tell yuh. I've buried three U.S. Deputies this last year. Gettin' so a man ain't got a foot of the Owl-hoot to call his own."

"Is that," Wesley conceded. "Three Federal riders in a year. That's hittin' 'em, mister! Pity Bawley wants you done in."

"We can't pistol Huck Callaway!" Sam protested. "Wouldn't be right. One Frank Ford's enough for a generation."

"I guess," Wesley snorted. "What'd you wanna go and make it so awkward for, Sam Oakie? You was all for salivatin' the varmint not five minutes gone."

"Didn't know who he was then." Sam guffawed. "I see'd the light. Mebbe we could convert him. It'd do us proud to have him ridin' our string."

"As to that," said Wesley cagily—"mebbe. Figure I'll take the critter back to Bawley. Seein' as Callaway must've seen Sol Health, and Sol must've talked to him, Callaway might have some interestin' things to tell the old man—if he wants to ride with our bunch?"

"Can see I've bin on the wrong side," Huck con-

fessed jauntily, exploiting the situation he'd been hoping Oakie would make for him. "Sure, I'll talk to your boss."

"Easy does it," Wesley cautioned. "This don't all of a sudden make us kissin' cousins or some sich. You're goin' in to the house roped. I ain't takin' no chances on you."

"Seems to me fair and reasonable," Huck observed. "Do I get some chow?"

"Ain't enough," Wesley snorted.

"Aw, he's a guts," Sam chuckled. "You're welcome to some of mine."

"Why, thank you, Sam."

"And I'll thank you, too, Sam," Wesley snarled, "jest to keep that .45 pointin'. Was you figurin' on putting it up?"

Sam looked sheepish. He straightened a weapon that had been dipping towards its holster, and gave Huck a light prod with the muzzle. "Better follow, Bill," he advised.

They walked up to the rock packed place beneath the overhang. A path, hidden from any distance, opened among the boulders. It wound perhaps thirty feet forward and down, into a basin over which stone leaned with a hooding effect. Up one corner of the depression, four horses backed and jostled sullenly at their ground-ties. Huck recognised the grey among them. Then, to one side, middling a sandy space, he saw the burly Loll bending over a cooking fire and stirring the contents of a large skillet with a Bowie knife. The odours of frying pork and roasting coffee hung pleasantly on the air. Even Bill Wesley made the grudging admission that the place didn't smell half bad. "Where's my plate?" he demanded.

Loll rattled a tin plate off a flat stone. With scooping movements of the broad Bowie blade, he piled up the meat and sow-belly beans. Then he swung round and pushed the plate immediately under Wesley's chin. "Hope it chokes you!" he roared. But next moment he caught sight of Huck, and his anger turned into a flutter-eyed mixture of bewilderment and dismay. "Why ain't he dead?"

"He's a celebrity," Sam explained.

"So was John Brown!" Loll protested.

"This is Huck Callaway."

"Well, ain't he the guy Bawley Fawcett wanted killin' so bad?" Loll turned a mean eye on Wesley, who had already picked up a filthy spoon and was pushing food into his **mouth** at such pressure that fat was dribbling off his chin and the skins of beans squashing out of his lips. "Why ain't he dead, Bill?"

Wesley swallowed massively, his eyes bulging with the effort. "'Cos he ain't," came the almost incoherent mumble from a mouth still half choked with pork and beans.

"Huck's goin' to change sides," Sam put in. "Bill's goin' to take him back to the house."

Loll blew a peculiar mocking sound through his tightly compressed lips. "That's hell of an excuse! He jest wants to git home and play monsewer with the French maid, Fifi; that's what it is."

Wesley gulped another huge mouthful then, quite casually, rammed his plate and the remainder of its hot contents into Loll's face. The victim shrieked with pain as the mess was screwed into his features. Then Wesley tripped him and flung him to the ground; and, honour being satisfied, said: "We will hear no more of it." He

then picked up another plate, loaded it from the skillet—leaving precious little food for anybody else—and resumed his eating. “Bind Callaway,” he slopped, sucking a finger and nodding at Sam. “Ain’t enough grub for him to go shares with you now. He can jest snug down till dawn.”

“Sorry, feller,” Sam said, with genuine regret. “But you heard the man.”

Huck was well and truly hog-tied. His sodden clothing was left to dry up him. He spent a cold, cramped, miserable night—listening, mostly, to Loll’s bewailing his burned face.

At sunup, the bonds were loosened and Huck was given coffee to drink. Next Sam Oakie led the grey out to the open rock. Ropes tightened again, Huck was carried to the animal and thrown over the saddle, ‘dead man’ fashion. Bill Wesley appeared with a black gelding. He warned his comrades to keep ‘a durn good watch’ during his absence. Then he stepped between the animals and caught their reins near the bits. For a half mile he led them over the smooth stone that contained the watercourse. They came to an improvised plank bridge that Huck had failed to notice the previous night as he passed higher up the rock. Wesley crossed over with his own horse first, then returned and steadied Huck’s mount over the shaky bridge. After that came another walk. This brought them to the place where rock and earth met. Here Wesley mounted. From then onwards, the way dropped steadily through brush and trees until the grassland was reached.

It was about nine in the morning when the Link Double O ranch buildings entered Huck’s distorted vision. He felt sick and colicky; horribly jolted. Though

anything could—and probably would—happen to him on Bawley Fawcett's property, the halt at the Link Double O corral was almost as welcome as if it had occurred outside Sol Heath's back door.

A couple of ranch-hands sauntered over from the bunkhouse and asked what was happening. Wesley gave them a very rough idea, tipped Huck to the ground, and told the men to untie him. This they did with swift competence, and Huck was left to stretch and writhe against the knotting cramps that hit his thighs, calves, and back. The grinding agonies brought sweat pouring from him. They left him weak and dazed. He dragged himself slowly to his feet, and when Wesley said: "You behave now"—gave a nod that was as close to an admission of defeat as any gesture he had ever made in his life. He laboured towards the huge, half-timbered ranch house, only just able to lift one foot in front of the other.

The effort became too much for him. A buggy stood outside the Fawcett porch. Reaching it, Huck grabbed the weatherhood hinge and hung on tightly. He drove the haze off his brain, and forced power into his muscles. But Wesley punched him in the back and almost dropped him. "Come on!" his captor jeered. "You are a sorry lookin' top gun. Straighten up, my man. You can do better than that. You're due to meet a big man. Gotta make a good impression, as things is with you."

"I'll make my impression!" Huck promised grimly, pushing himself away from the vehicle and lurching to an open front door. He hesitated on the threshold, but a push kept him moving forward.

Into a broad hallway he passed. On his right a stairway ascended to a landing where sunlight arrowed

through the props of a balustrade and burst against a wall. A shadow dimmed the radiance; then a young woman appeared. Huck knew her at once for the girl he had seen in a lover's arms the previous evening. She was dressed in velvet now, and her petticoats swished the stairs as she started to descend. Her gaze rested on Huck in momentary interest, then became impersonal. She turned her head and spoke a casual word to somebody on the landing behind her. Huck was aware that she hadn't recognised him. It must have been as he had thought likely at the time. The willow foliage had obscured his features.

His slight pause to observe the girl earned him another shove. "Interestin' filly," Wesley whispered confidentially. "Ain't no better'n she should be. But don't favour us oldsters; so don't go gettin' ideas."

"Who is she?" Huck muttered.

"The old man's daughter. Mala Fawcett."

Huck nodded. He guessed that explained something. Gal with a proud name, no better'n she should be, spoon-in' with a handsome kid below her station. Bawley'd have the hide off her—and the boy's head for a turnip. No wonder they'd gone Kentucky on their nags!

"Here," Wesley grunted, stopping Huck outside a newly grained door. Muffled voices reached them through the woodwork. It sounded as if an argument were going on within. Wesley lifted his knuckles, hesitated, shrugged, then knocked.

"Enter." The word was not an invitation; it was a command.

Wesley opened the door. "In you go, Callaway."

Huck stepped into the room. Directly before him spread a Persian carpet with a peacock-eye motif. Be-

yond the carpet stood a vast oaken desk, fronted with hexagonal panelling and medieval carvings. Behind the desk sat a straight-backed, square-shouldered man, with close cropped grey hair, blunt nose, full mouth, and strange, omniscient eyes. There was a coldness about the figure, a sphynx-like watchfulness—an absence of any deeply felt emotion.

"Good morning, Mr Fawcett," Wesley fawned.

The rancher gave his man a 'speak when you're spoken to glance'. Then his stare probed at Huck. "Callaway," he said.

"Flattered you remember me," Huck answered, trying to keep the irony out of his tones. Then a small movement caused him to look quickly to the right. He saw Myra Besant sitting by the window. Her son, Will, was leaning on the back of her chair. Each was showing about the same amount of surprise at seeing him as he felt at seeing them.

"From the dam?" Fawcett snapped at Wesley.

"Yes, suh."

"You thought I'd want to question him here?"

"Yes, suh."

A bleak smiled played about the cattleman's eyes. "He wants to change sides?"

"Yes, suh."

"And you want to see Fifi?"

"No—yes, suh."

"That's right, Wesley; don't ever lie to me. I know. I just know." Fawcett folded his arms and eased himself more comfortably into his padded chair. "I seem to be blessed with callers this morning. All around me I find the desire for change. Change—the only order that never changes. Ah! We have the ever-lovely Myra worrying

about her son. She thinks I am corrupting him. I? Can one man corrupt another, Wesley?" /

"That's only for a man as wise as you is to say, suh," the gunhawk evaded neatly, while still flattering.

"Callaway?"

"He sure can," said Huck bluntly.

"The Old Adam." Fawcett turned a crystal paper-weight with his fingertips. "I have to thank you, Callaway."

"Me?" Huck frowned watchfully; he didn't get it.

"For smoothing my path towards a happy consummation." The rancher glanced at Myra; and there was no mistaking what was in his glance.

"Mal Rigset?" Huck demanded sharply.

"An able employee, but a more than able rival. Poor Malcolm's work was done."

"It sure was." That was all Huck said. That was all he could trust himself to say. He was being chewed up alive by jealousy. Could a man get to be as old as he?—see as much as he had seen?—do as much as he had done? Yet still feel a basic emotion with this cruel intensity? It was against reason. But it was happening!

Fawcett's eyes were concentrated upon Huck's face, and his deeply penetrating instincts were at work again. "Her first beau. So you still feel for her, Callaway. Little good will that do you. I intend to make Myra mistress of Link Double O and its satellite ranges. She is a woman worthy of better than life has always given her."

"I'll die first!" Myra declared in low, fierce tones. "You're the soul of villainy, Bawley Fawcett. You foul everything you touch. You drive your women to suicide. Your men to drink, lust, and crime. You're trying to turn my son into a killer; and you've already got him

smoking, drinking, and swearing. Marry you! I'd—I'd die first!"

The cattleman sighed and tut-tutted. "Hysteria—female histrionics; how they bore me. I shall have you, Myra—when I am ready. A way is always to hand."

"I know," said Myra bitterly. "You've done these things before. You'd kill off my business as a seamstress. Make the bank call in their loan. Get at me through threats against my son. There's nothing so bad you wouldn't do it." Myra jerked to her feet. "Well, I've got a hired buggy outside. I'm taking my boy with me. We'll both leave this rotten district that you run so rottenly! We'll make out elsewhere."

"No, you won't," Fawcett retorted quietly. "Sit down, and simmer down, Myra." Bawley smiled at young Will. "You're happy at the Link Double O, aren't you, boy? We're making a man of you. Your mother doesn't understand. Mothers never do. And you know I don't blame you because Huck Callaway escaped from Kudo on your horse. A thing like that could happen to anybody. You want to stay in my employ, don't you, boy?"

"Yes, sir," Will said simply.

"You've got him mesmerized!" Myra stormed.

"Your son knows where he's well off, Myra. I wish I could say the same for you." Fawcett glanced back at Huck. "This must have been entertaining for you, Callaway." He stroked his chin, evidently enjoying his little jest. "But on to more important matters. You've seen the dam and know what an impossible problem you're up against—and now you want to work for me. That's good sense. It would be equally good sense for me to take you on. How is Sol Heath making out?"

Huck put on a hard and treacherous look. "He's breakin' fast."

"What are his plans?"

"To get that water back somehow."

"Illuminating," Fawcett mocked—"if impossible."

"Impossible," Huck agreed harshly. He hated what Myra and the boy must be thinking of him, yet he was exulting also because he had long ago seen how he could restore Sol Heath's water supply. All he wanted now was to acquire Fawcett's confidence and the chance to ride off Link Double O as a whole man. Then he'd show this petty tyrant what for!

But Fawcett said: "Callaway, you're up to something. I can't see what it is; but I can feel you're not to be trusted. You may have persuaded those bird-brained gunhands I employ to regard you as a hero, but I'm never deceived. We ranchers who enter the market for the best men—keep tabs on the best men. The range telegraph says you're a hundred per cent reliable. You've never played turncoat, quit on a job, or taken your pay unless you've first given your employer full satisfaction. If you hired for Heath, you'd die for Heath. That's the code of your kind."

"Ain't never rid into anythin' as stupid as this Flyin' H job before," Huck protested slyly.

Fawcett gave a cynical grin. "That's the one true thing you've said. You're through, Callaway. Lars Dindye has a posse out hunting you, so I understand. It'll come this way round eventually. If it doesn't, I'll have you escorted into town this evening. You won't mind dying at a rope's end?"

Huck wondered a moment. Could the rancher's amused contempt be a subtle test of his reactions after

all? No, this was a wild notion. Fawcett had been making too much sense. His attitude was a by-product of the truth. Huck dropped the act. "Y'ain't fit to lick Heath's boots, mister. Myra's got your measure. I'm goin' to make you a promise, here an' now. I'm goin' to outlive you by forty years—and spit on your grave twice a week!"

The rancher yawned. "Threats," he said, "bore me, too. Wesley, lock our over-confident friend in the root cellar!"

SEVEN

BOUND once more, Huck lay upon the dry, musty floor of the root cellar. He watched the black shapes of Bill Wesley and another man ascending a ladder. In the open again, Wesley began to lower the twin flaps of the door and, while they were still an inch or two open, sighed piously and said: "Don't you wish we'd stitched on them wings for you last night? Now you gotta wait for that nasty ole hang-rope to bust your neck. Never mind. Docs say it's nigh painless—even though a guy do jerk and kick somethin' fearful!"

"Go and jump off a cliff!" Huck advised sweetly.

The door-flaps thudded shut. A key grated in the lock. Wesley and his companion departed, laughing gustily. Huck was left to darkness and silence, both of which were complete.

Several minutes passed. Huck struggled experimentally with his bonds. But no snatch or wriggle on his part could loosen them by a fraction of an inch. He dragged himself around the floor, brushing a cheek against the rough hewn walls, seeking some short of sharp projection on which to rub the ropes; but no suitable projection could he find.

Exhausted at last, he gave up his thoughts of escape

and relaxed as much as he could. Sweat dried upon him, and the chill of the store-place began creeping into his bones. There was a minute break in the silence. A rat squeaked; another answered. Soon the creatures were scurrying around him, their loathsome softness drawing across exposed portions of his skin, their faint, musky odour filling his nostrils. He concentrated his mind away from this mild torment: dwelt upon the facts of his position. It was a thousand to one that he would have been hanged by this time tomorrow. And like as not he'd be in a place darker and tighter than this. Still, he wouldn't know about it. Right then, he felt that he didn't know much at all—except that he had Sol Heath's problem whipped, if he could only get the solution to Sol. Be sure Lars Dindyke wouldn't let him write a letter before the boys got to work with the hemp. And even if such a letter were permitted, it would pass immediately into the hands of Bawley Fawcett. Again, if he asked to see Heath before the necktie event, there'd be a listener placed handy; and with dangerous information locked in his head, Sol would certainly stop bushwhack lead before he was three miles out of town. That wouldn't help any. Seemed nothing would help any.

For himself, he'd have to be brave. A guy had to reach the end of his string sometime. There was always a quota of unfinished business and regrets. He'd been lucky to last this long. Most of the fast guns died well short of thirty. And here was he, pushing forty. Where'd he finally gone wrong? Simple. He never should have returned to the greenland; the greenland had always been poison for him. Yet he wouldn't have missed seeing Myra again. See your love—and die. Pah! He was getting sentimental. Another sign of age. Maybe he'd be better

over the edge. It was a young man's world—the world of the West and the big sky. /

Huck's mind began the fatal backward drift. Pa. Ma. Dead and gone these thirty years. Plague. '59? Yeah, the plague had halved Kudo's population that year. There had been old Ned, his houn'dawg. And a mite o' starving during the War years. Then that last afternoon with Myra. Of all his life, that June afternoon was the only piece he'd want to live again. If he could—

A soft grating of metal reached his ears. The lock? The door flaps lifted and were lowered gently apart. Blinding sunlight streamed into the cellar. He shut his eyes tightly and rolled his head aside. Quick steps pattered off the ladder. "Huck."

"Myra?"

"We're going to get you out of this."

He opened his watering eyes very slightly. The woman was bending over him. She was sawing at his bonds with a shut-knife. "We?"

"Will."

"You know what you're mixin' into?"

"He told me what you—said to him outside Diamond Pass."

"That made a difference—somehow."

"To him—and me. I made him tell me what's been happening to him."

Huck felt the freedom of his limbs. He tried to stand. Myra helped him. He leaned hard on her shoulder until his legs began to function normally. "Thank you, Myra," he said.

"You're welcome, Huck," she said. "The boy's got your dun waiting."

Aware of the need for haste, Huck preceded his com-

panion in their clamber back to the open. He looked up at the ranch house wall that loomed above him. There was nobody at the one window from which the rescue might have been seen. Then he saw Will Besant beckoning from a nearby clump of laurels. He left Myra to shut down the flaps of the root cellar door, and headed for the boy.

The big dun was stubbing a hoof among the bushes; and the kid's grey stood beside it, swishing flies. "I stole the cellar key," Will said.

"Glad to see you've got sense enough to know y'can't stay here," Huck growled. "This is a mighty dangerous thing you've done. You got away with it the first time. Thought you wanted to stay on here?"

"And a cat likes bein' scalded!" the boy growled. "Much more of Farson and some of the other guys, and I'd surely have killed somebody. But you don't tell Bawley Fawcett that!"

Myra had joined them. "Jaw!" she exclaimed. "Ride—for the love of heaven!"

Huck hit the saddle. "What about you, Myra?"

"He won't hurt me. Just take care of the boy."

"Like he was mine!" Huck promised, giving the dun a lot of steel. And out of the bushes the animal plunged. The grey stayed with it. They veered down the far side of a barn—pounded towards open country; hit full gallop. "Stay left of me!" Huck bellowed. "Keep in close!" He knew his body was the only protection he could offer if shooting should start from the house. But no bullets came their way. Their break seemed to have coincided with an exact minute when there was nobody about to see it. The business was almost too good to be true!

'Too good to be true.' The phrase sent echoes rolling

round the inside of Huck's head. His mind went to devious thought. The way off Link Double O, on this, the shortest route back to Sol Heath's grass, passed on what could become a two hundred yard gauntlet run between steep, tree-clad slopes. Ambush? Had Fawcett actually planned that this escape should occur? Didn't he have implicit trust in Lars Dindyke's hang-rope? Was ambush to be his method of ridding himself of a wily enemy?—and a boy whom he guessed to be a traitor? As Myra had put it, there was nothing so bad that Fawcett wouldn't do it!

The narrows came hurtling on. Huck's intuitive dread grew to a brain hounding malignancy. Then he knew he was right. A cotton puff answered an impatient trigger-finger among the trees. Huck heard the lead sing. A volley crashed like an involuntary protest to the premature explosion. The air seethed. But these shots, also, had been fired off a range too long to insure certain hits. Huck and the kid survived. Yet Huck realized they couldn't be that lucky twice; not with a dozen rifles pointing at them! He swung down the left side of his horse, Indian fashion, then bawled at the youngster to do the same thing on his, Will's, right. This placed the racing mounts between them and further bullets.

Two hundred yards. No distance at all. Huck placed his reliance on the riflemen's hesitation. Cowpokes didn't like sighting deliberately on horses. He and Will might get through before the Link Double O hands realized that horse-killing was inevitable if the escape was to be stopped.

The vital seconds flew. Brown earth blurred. Then lead started to fly in earnest. There was the beat of hooves; the tumbling echoes of the guns; the zip-fire flit

of ricocheting lead against the sun—the dust, the sweat, the back-sling of slaver; the hard surge of muscle driving flesh, bone, and heartbeats towards the open land up front. All—all a prayer and a promise. And then, unbelievably—safety!

“By Harry!” Huck muttered, rising to his normal seat. “Oh, by heck!” He passed a shaking hand across his streaming, dirt encrusted features. “Y’get to believe in miracles!”

“What they wanna do it for?” the kid demanded, eyes glaring from a head that looked all polished skullbone.

“Little matter of killin’ us!” Huck explained at an ironical yell. “There’s folk in this world what ain’t awful nice!”

“I worked with them guys!” Will piped.

“And was they awful nice?”

Will swore at passing grade fluency.

“There, then,” Huck chided. “And if I hear any more of that kind o’ language, you’ll get my toe up your end. Okay?”

“No, it aint. You cusses worse’n Igor Farson!”

“You don’t do what I does, young man, y’does what I tells you. Your ma said to look after you; and I’m goin’ to look after you—if I gotta kill you t’do it. That okay?”

“Aw, hell!” the kid complained. “If it ain’t one, it’s another!”

Huck grinned covertly. He threw a swift glance over his shoulder. No sign of a pursuit as yet. Then he gave his attention to the land ahead. The horses were on flat, firm going. They kept running as if they didn’t wish for another experience like the one through which they had lately passed. The grey, now carrying fifty pounds less

than the freighting Huck had imposed upon it, kept up with the big dun and even had the older horse snuffling with annoyance when, for short periods, it pushed its nose in front.

Taking another look back, Huck saw what he hoped he wouldn't see. J.B.'d heads were jolting, small and far, between sky and buffalo grass. The chase was on. It could hardly have come otherwise. The man who'd had charge of the botched drygulching was probably feeling mighty sick right now. Fawcett was not the kind of boss who'd deal tolerantly with failure where he'd expected certain success.

Noting the length of time that Huck's head remained turned, Will Besant peered back. He, too, saw the pursuers, and started kicking fiercely with his heels.

"Hey!" Huck warned sharply. "Ease up on the spur!"

"They'll catch us!"

"That be damned! They're only on hosses like us. Jest keep a fast, even pace. We gotta spare these critters. There's a climb comin' up."

The advice turned out sound enough. When the grass gave place to rising stone, the gap between hunters and hunted had narrowed very little.

Uphill, the dun came into its own. It had the shoulders and haunches for the heave and punch of a climb. The grey, however—perhaps not yet fully recovered from the hard treatment that Huck had given it, for all its recent speed—again made a poor showing on grade work. It lost wind and began to drop behind. The boy didn't help any. He voiced anger, and kept shifting his balance as he sought to improve the animal's efforts.

"Jest sit still," Huck advised. "That one's all cow pony; it ain't go no hack."

"It oughta go!" Will snarled.

"We ain't all made as good," Huck said, slowing to let the youngster draw up; "but we all matter as much. Hosses and men."

Huck turned his head only once at this stage. He knew they had lost a good deal of ground. It was simply a matter of ascertaining how much. About a quarter of a mile, he judged. This placed the Link Double O riders about half a mile behind them. Still well beyond gunshot. And as the pursuers had been pushing their mounts pretty hard and still had the steepest of the climb to come, it was possible that, once over the hump—if he and Will then called for that little extra—they would more than regain the lost ground before the followers hit the downgrade.

They reached the top crags, passed through the defile that Huck had used the previous evening, and spurred into their descent on the Kudo trail. Round bends they swerved, the harsh clatter of metallised hooves beating back in expanding echoes off the heights. The dun was now running for pure joy. For a minute or two, the grey tried to imitate its enthusiasm. But there was a tense, forced quality in the animal's motion that worried Huck. He came to the opinion that it was laming in the right foreleg. A constant twitch of the knee to shoulder tendons warned against an impending loss of pace. The change from easy running over grass to the jar of galloping on rock had produced either cramp or a strain. It happened that way often enough. Amounted to misuse of a horse. Yet what in tarnation could a man do save punish a critter when his life depended on the four legs beneath him?

The drop in speed became noticeable. But they were

nearing the bottom of the grade now. Scree and shale gave way to patches of productive soil. Buffalo grass waved; a tree spread against the yonder. The fringe of prairie that indented between Kudo and the crags came into view. Soon they'd be able to turn off and head across country for Heath range.

A testing gun boomed among the pursuers. Huck had almost forgotten about them in his worry over the kid's horse. He threw a glance to the rear. The Link Double O riders had narrowed the gap to about four hundred yards. They were at long gunshot; and spurring confidently. Other guns began to crack from their midst. Huck heard the familiar whisper of passing bullets.

He fetched his horse into the right turn. Will Besant followed. The grey's gait improved over the grass, and the steep undulations in the land kept the Link Double O gunfire down to a minimum. But the day seemed an ill-fated one for the youngster's animal. No sooner had they reached level range than it put its troublesome leg into a gopher hole and stumbled badly. This reduced the creature to a hobble. A single quick glance told Huck all he wanted to know. "That does it!" he declared grimly, pointing towards a roughly circled pile of low boulders a short distance ahead. "Over there! We'll have to shoot it out!"

Will stopped the grey and pulled his booted Winchester. He muttered an okay.

Huck slapped his empty holster. "Pitch me your Colt!"

The kid jerked and tossed the sixgun to Huck's waiting hand; then he tumbled off the grey and started running for the rocks. Huck sent the dun into a rearing turn between Will and the oncoming horsemen. Smoke

mushroomed, blue-black, patterning the breeze, and metal whistled by. Thumbing the hammer, Huck steadied his Colt over the head of his jinking horse and squeezed. A rider who had drawn slightly ahead of the main bunch tipped backwards from the saddle, legs spread, and a loose boot went flying. The answering fire made Huck dip towards his mount's mane. Then a slug dragged at the dun's tail. The animal began to prance and circle madly. Huck realized that he'd never manage to regain control of it in the time available; so he snatched his feet from the stirrups and vaulted backwards over cantle and rump. He landed in an ungainly crouch, lips snarling, gun pointing at the oncoming enemy. He felt the suicidal urge to blast away indiscriminately. The horsemen were only fifty yards distant. He'd get at least one more before the remainder shot the life out of him. But what would then happen to Myra's boy? In the fleeting second that the question impressed upon his mind, he saw that it was Bill Wesley who was leading the Link Double O party. No guy would, by choice, leave a kid to that sinner's tender mercies!

Huck faced about. No old jack rabbit ever put in a better spurt. Lead clipped the grass around and ahead of him. He zig-zagged. A rider loomed above him—all weaving shadow and stinking horsehide. A pistol touched the back of his skull. He dodged aside. The weapon thunderclapped. Burning powder grains seared along the head wound he had received last night. He screamed in agony, but had received no real damage. Then flame streaked from behind the rockpile and the threatening horseman tumbled beside Huck, his throat pumping blood. Another man galloped up. Once more the rifle spat. A sharp cry preceded the emptying of a third saddle.

Huck leapt on to the rocks. Silver streaks and smudges appeared around his bootsoles as lead dissolved. Then he dived into cover. His shoulder struck stone. He rose again and blazed at a horseman who was rounding the pile. The guy had just fired in upon Will, missing him narrowly. "Look to your head, boy!" Huck ordered, watching his target crumple weakly over the pommel and go jolting away on an uncontrolled mount.

Wesley's strident bellow cut through the battle racket; he ordered his followers to group up and charge.

"Meet 'em!" Huck snapped. "Aint more'n eight or nine left. They'll learn this aint a healthy way o' life!"

Will settled his rifle barrel into a niche and hastily fed cartridges into his magazine. Huck robbed the kid's belt to reload his own spent chambers. The shells in his loops would be useless after their immersion in water. Whooping, the riders kicked to a gallop. Fire splashed from their fists. Flint-eyed, oblivious to risk, Huck straightened and sent a round six slicing among them. The deeper boom of the rifle backed him. Saddles emptied. The charge lost order—became an insane whirl of mane and jostling horses, a bedlam of screams and detonations; all culminating in a low-flighted leap of animals that sent Huck and Will flat upon their faces as legs stretched above their position, cleared it, or split hooves and damaged bone in landing short and dragging fetlocks amidst granite.

Snapping into a sitting position as the last horse passed over, Huck grabbed the rifle that lay beside his companion and began to trigger bullets among the shapes that milled beyond him. "Reload the Colt," he called to the boy.

"Circle! Circle!" Wesley bawled. "G'damn you for clowns—circle!"

THE TRAIL TO HELL

Then firing sounded from the west. Huck glimpsed riders pounding off the distant plain. Even at half a mile, the leading shape of Charlie Joad could not be mistaken. It was Flying H to the rescue.

Wesley raged and swore as his followers turned away from the latest gunfire. But the Fawcett riders had had enough for the day. More than half their number were dead or wounded. Soon the survivors were in full flight towards the Kudo trail.

"I'll get you, Callaway!" Wesley screeched, dipping into his saddlebag and dragging out what looked like a big stick of candy wrapped in tar-paper. "I'll blow you past hell!" He leaned sideways in the saddle and his pistol flashed. Then he snatched the bit and curved swiftly away as Huck fired at him. His right hand lofted. Sparks spluttered from the stick that it held.

"It's dynamite!" Huck gasped, pushing down the head of the kid beside him.

The stick left the galloping Wesley in a steep arc. Huck watched the explosive reach the highest point in its climb, then sighted his rifle upon it.

This was to be the shot of his life—or death!

EIGHT

HUCK squeezed the trigger. He felt the rifle kick as the sky was split by sound and light. A blast wave hurled him on to his back. His senses reeled and receded, touched darkness, then pressed slowly back to renewed awareness. He stirred his limbs, and inched into a sitting position. "You awright?" Will's voice whispered through the popping in his ears.

"What you whisperin' about?"

"Ain't whisperin'! I'm bawlin' fit to bust!"

"Oh."

"You awright?"

"Jest about."

The riders under Charlie Joad slid their mounts to a halt and thudded to the grass. Joad lumbered over to the rocks, fanning his red face with his J.B. "Thought it was you, Huck. Was that dynamite?"

Huck smacked his head from side to side, to rid himself of the worst noises within. "Weren't no firecracker, Charlie. What happened to the b—d that threw it?"

"Got blowed some; but he high-tailed in one piece."

"Wesley. He jest went down in my little black book."

"That sure was some shooting, Mr Callaway!" Will Besant praised, his eye showing genuine admiration.

Huck twitched an eyebrow at Joad. "Mister now." Then he grinned at Will. "Boy, if I'd've missed, you and me'd've been havin' hot toast and roast chestnut by now. That wouldn't be so bad. But figure me racin' round and round all them dark back alleys with your ma chasin' me with Old Bub's prodder. A thing like that makes a man's eye mighty sharp!"

"What's the Besant kid doin' with you, Huck?" Joad asked.

"That," said Huck, allowing willing hands to help him to his feet, "is a story I do not propose to tell right now. Will is my sidekick. Damme if he ain't already half useful!" Huck slapped the boy on the back. "As for you, Mr Joad, sir, what gen'lemanly saint sent you t'save my best gammon?"

Joad spat. "Lars Dindyke dropped by last night. He had hell's own brag of a posse behind him. Said you was wanted for the murder of Mal Rigset and the woundin' of Igor Farson. Boss said for the crew to mount up and kinda patrol our grass and round about; and if Lars should drop on you anywhere local, we was to git t'be enthusiastic lawmen and get old Lars's posse in such a g'damn stew—"

"I'd be over the hill before you all got sorted out," Huck completed, grinning.

"Right on the head," the foreman assured him. "An undertaker's whack! Seems we come along when you was havin' Link Double O trouble instead. Bit of luck us bein' near and handy when the firin' started."

Huck nodded. "Luck's been kinda mixed for us. We

stepped real lively through a dirty bit o' bushwhackin'; then the kid's grey went lame when we was headin' the parade. That dun o' mine's about some place." He looked round, then flashed out a finger. "That's it; half a mile yonder. The grey ain't far from it. I'd take it kindly, Charlie, if you'd have one of your boys bring the critters in. Then we'll head for the home buildings. I got what's mighty interestin' to tell Sol Heath."

"Been round that dam?" Joad demanded, after sending a rider to fetch the strayed counts. "Good news?"

"Could be," said Huck cagily.

"The crew's ready to be used."

"It'll get used," came the promise—"but hard!"

"What about the bodies?"

"Leave 'em. Maybe Link Double O'll send back a fetchin' party."

"Buzzards?"

"Even a buzzard's got some respect for its belly," said Huck disgustedly.

On the ride back to the Flying H ranch house, Will Besant doubled with Huck on the dun. Now that all the excitement was over, the youngster had lapsed into a shocked, tremulous silence.

"Hoped you'd never have to kill a man," Huck said at last. "It ain't what we hope, though."

"They needed killin'!" Will spat bitterly.

It wasn't conscience, then, that was troubling the boy.

"What's eatin' you, son?"

"Ma."

"Rest your mind," Huck comforted. "That skunk Fawcett has got a case on her—such as he's capable of."

He won't do her no mischief, 'specially as he set up that escape. You'd figured that, hadn't you?"

Will nodded. "Reckon the cuss knew I helped you ride out of Kudo ahead of Lars Dindyke."

"I ain't met a sharper one. He got a way o' seeing into your mind like no guy I never knowed—'cept, mebbe, Wyatt Earp. What happened to you and your ma after I got took to the root cellar?"

"The old man wouldn't let ma go. He was all nice and polite—like he can be, when he wants. Reckoned ma had gotta stick around for the day; eat with him an' such; and I was to show her round the place. Ma got 'greeable—I guess because o' you bein' a prisoner. Then we fixed to let you out." Will shrugged his thin shoulders. "That's all." But suddenly the kid had an afterthought. He turned his head until the corner of his eye glinted mischievously on Huck's face. "Reckon my ma's got a case on you."

Huck ignored the slight speeding of his heart. "You're plain scats," he announced.

"You could get to be my old man."

"That'd be a hell of a promotion! How'd it suit you?"

"Well," said Will judiciously, looking round the rest of the group as if to draw comparisons, "you can shoot pretty good, you're the best cusser I've ever heard, and you're kinda famous."

"Humph. D'you like me?"

"Could even do that at a pinch."

"You don't have to pinch too hard."

"Oh, I won't," the kid promised.

Huck snorted. "You and this dumfoozle hoss is about the orneriest critters—ah!" There was a lot more silence after that. But Huck couldn't help feeling rather pleased about something.

It was well into the afternoon when Heath's crew—or those members of it that Joad hadn't already detached for range work—escorted Huck and the boy to the Flying H hitch-rail. Sol Heath lumbered from the house to meet the party. "Well done, Charlie," he called to Joad; then he gave Huck a relieved smile. "Mighty glad they didn't get you, Callaway."

Huck nodded. "You can thank Joad some more. He turned up just right. Was about ready to die with my boots on."

"I'll hear about that."

"You'd better get it straight about Mal Rigset first. He put the poison in Pot End. Ain't no doubt. I'd've gotten a confession of sorts outa him if Iggy Farson hadn't horned in and blown the whole shebang."

The rancher nodded, but there were the beginnings of a frown in the gaze he concentrated upon Will Besant. "Is the boy a prisoner?"

"Nope."

"He's Link Double O."

"Was. He's my sidekick now. He's saved my hide a time or two already. If he ain't welcome, I ain't."

Heath's face cleared. "Of course he's welcome. I liked his pa, I like his ma, and I'm going to like him. Step down, boy. Here's my hand."

Will slid to the ground. He seemed rather over-awed as he walked towards the smiling rancher. He looked as if he would prefer to touch his forelock when he took the extended hand and gently shook it. Laughing aloud, Heath tightened his own grip and made the shake a strong, firm one. "God bless you, lad. A long life and a happy one!"

"There," said Huck approvingly. "He ain't no aris-

toocrat, y'see. He's jest a nice guy what happens to employ folk and have a lot more worries'n most."

Heath grinned. "Supposing you go to the kitchen. You'll find Mrs Heath there. Tell her I sent you." The rancher patted his sizeable midriff. "Her main interest in life is in adding inches to a man's prestige. You hungry?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then get going!"

Will scuttled off.

Huck stepped down. "That was a mighty nice thing you just did, Mr Heath. Now I got to tell you."

Heath studied the wound along the side of Huck's head. "Yes. Yes, I expect you have. Let's go to the office."

They entered the stuffy little room. Huck sank tiredly into the visitor's chair. Heath supplied him with a large whisky. Then the cattleman sat down behind his desk and waited. After swallowing a large part of his drink at a gulp, Huck set his glass aside. "D'you keep any explosives on the ranch?" he asked suddenly.

"I got in a box of dynamite after the damming up," Heath replied. "Seemed like healthy anticipation. You've been up on the hogsback? We could blow through?" The rancher grinned wryly. "I wouldn't have blamed you if you'd cut out for distant parts, with so much buzzing round your ears. I rather expected you to."

"That ain't my way," said Huck shortly, adding a brief account of all that had happened to him since parting from Heath at Pot End more than twenty four hours previously. "The kid and his mother got me out of Fawcett's hands," he concluded. "Will had to git with me."

"You were both lucky to come through that bush-whack set-up," Heath growled. "A badly wanted man escaping, and the boy in the way of the bullets. Yes. What could you have made of it? Will Besant can have a bunk here and a notch on my payroll, if he wants it."

"Ah," Huck said; "thank yuh. We'll see how it works out. But all the jabber so far, 'ffectin' as it is to me, ain't more'n tenterhookin' you. T'git on about that dynamite. You'd never shift the dam in six months of Sundays." He gave his reasons, and the rancher's face lengthened. "But," he hastened, "there's a way I dropped on sorta by accident. High up on the cliff, left of the old water drop, there's a cave-opening. If you go through it and cross a big cave, you come to a rock wall that water runs on the other side of. I calc'late a few sticks of dynamite'd punch that wall down to suds and gravy. The water'd then divert through the cave and rush out of the cliff-hole, making the hole bigger and bigger all the time. You'd get your big splash on land that slants into the old watercourse; which'd mean your flow would be restored in full."

"Sounds good," Heath confessed. "But as I understand it from what you were telling me just now, you got on to the cliff-face in a not very pleasant manner. Isn't climbing up to the ledge going to be—difficult?"

"You get nothing easy in this schoolhouse," Huck growled, finishing his drink.

"So long as you graduate," the rancher muttered thoughtfully.

Huck grinned sourly. He made to put his glass down again. Then he thought he heard a faint brushing sound on the other side of the door. He dug his fingertips into

his ears and bored towards the drums. He listened again. Nothing. His hearing must still be monkeyed up by the bang Wesley's dynamite had made. Nevertheless—he felt crawly, uneasy; suspicious.

"You're going to attempt this thing tonight?" Heath asked.

"Tonight," Huck agreed, noting that his companion showed no sign of having heard anything untoward. "I don't want Fawcett puttin' too much thought into this. He knows my mind's been spinnin'. And he ain't lackin' upstairs."

"The guards."

"I ain't worryin' overly about them. Lazy slobs. They'll be gutsing and takin' it easy in their hide way past the dam. So long as we don't make enough racket to set the folk on Boot Hill dancin', we'll be okay."

"One last question. Assuming we bring the water back to my grass, could Bawley blow an effective dam some place else?"

Huck nodded. "Bout any place. But he'd only make a lot of useless flooding that'd rob him of graze. He ain't goin' to be that doggone stupid."

Another tiny movement seemed to issue from behind the door. Huck thrust his head forward sharply. Heath noticed the action, frowned, and demanded: "What's up?"

Shooting the rancher an angry glance, Huck dived off chair and flung open the office door. He peered out, left and right. Nobody there; but he was fairly certain that he caught a whisper of hastening steps from the right.

"You're jumpy!" Heath snapped.

"I think we were bein' listened to!" Huck snapped back.

"But that's crazy, man! Who in my house would want to sneak up to this door and eavesdrop? Whatever the truth concerning me may be elsewhere, in my home I'm surrounded by love and loyalty." Then Heath's manner became understanding and sympathetic. "Look, Callaway, you're worn to a frazzle. You've taken more rough in a day than most men take in ten years. Get some sleep. You left your bedroll in the bunkhouse, before we left for Pot End, didn't you?"

Huck nodded. "You're right o' course; I'm plum tuckered. Trouble with me is, I got a long memory. Can't forget that there was guns waitin' for me outside Diamond Pass. If you foller?"

"I follow," the rancher said. "But it isn't the house you've got to worry about. Our plans are safe enough in here."

"Take your word for it, mister," Huck said, yawning through a mounting glow of alcohol. "It's my carcass to hit the sack. Hoist me out if I'm not awake at moon-up."

"I'll see that's arranged."

Huck left the building and shambled to the bunkhouse, where he dropped into the nearest bunk and, without benefit of blanket, fell into a heavy sleep.

It seemed about one and a half minutes later that he was wakened by a violent shaking. He started up, wondering where the devil he was—trying to focus on the features that hovered near his own in the yellow lamp glow. "It's me," came an impatient explanation from Charlie Joad. "The boss said to rouse you out."

"That's right," Huck muttered, words distorted by a cavernous yawn as he swung to the floor. "What's the time?"

"Round ten."

"Moon up?"

"Coming."

Sol Heath was waiting for them inside the front door of the ranch house. "Figured you'd like to eat, Callaway," he said.

Oddly enough, despite the great length of time he had gone without food, Huck wasn't hungry; so he shook his head. "But I'll accept a whisky," he added.

"All you want," Heath answered hospitably. "Charlie?"

"Never touch it save Christmas, Thanksgivin', and the Fourth," the foreman replied; "thanking you all the same, boss. I'll mosey along and see all's fixed to ride."

"Fine, Charlie," the rancher acknowledged. "Let's go to the parlour, Callaway."

Heath opened the first door on their right. He stepped aside and let Huck precede him into a large, shadowy, heavy-beamed room, with a fireplace of chipped stone, worn carpets, and old plush-seated furniture. Huck folded his arms and stood by the table. The rancher crossed to a sideboard, lifted two glasses from a shelf, and a bottle from a tray. He poured the drinks and, after carrying one to Huck, parked his backside near the leaping firelight and called a toast. "Success to us!"

"Success!" Huck echoed; but he was already striding across the room, towards the sideboard, where a new tintype had caught his eye. Even in the poor lighting and at a distance of several feet, there had been a familiarity about the face in the picture that drew him. He bent close enough for details in the likeness to become clear. Yes. There was that tall forehead again, the sensitive eyes—and the weak mouth. Here was Mala Faw-

cett's lover. "Who's that?" Huck rasped, jerking a thumb, and already certain that he knew the answer.

"Caleb, my son," said the startled Heath.

"Surrounded by love and loyalty, huh?"

The rancher stiffened. "You'd do well to make yourself plain, Callaway."

"Where's the kid now?"

"My son is free to come and go as he pleases."

"Is he in the house?"

"I will not submit—!"

"Don't start losin' your dad-blamed temper. This is too important for that. The boy rode out jest after I hit the sack, huh? He ain't been back since?"

"That's correct," Heath agreed. "But—"

"But me no buts!" Huck snarled. "Your Cal's run to Fawcett. He's the Flying H tongue in Bawley's ear. He was listenin' to our bray from outside your office this afternoon."

"Do you know what you're saying?" Heath demanded, between rage and horror.

"Do you know who your son's woman is?"

A grin faltered between Heath's lips and eyes. "Some saloon girl, maybe? The boy's got to learn the facts of—"

"Then you don't know. I didn't see how you could. When I last saw that young man, he was doin' a real fine job o' makin' love to Mala Fawcett."

"Good—God!" Heath lowered himself shakily into an armchair. "The young fool. That girl is Jezebel incarnate. Men have died over her already. She'll ruin Cal's life!"

"Pah!" Huck sneered savagely. "Stop worryin' about your son. He ain't done no worryin' over you. He's meb-be ruined your life. The price o' love. A harlot's price!"

"You're mad! He'd never carry my business to the Link Double O. Sell me for—"

Huck laughed in his employer's face. "Fork your cayuse, mister. Give you a gallon o' my blood to a dented shell case, there'll be a bristle of rifles near that dam, when we reach it, that'll put the heights of Fredericksburg into the memory of pleasant takin'!"

"You don't frighten me, Callaway," the rancher said. "I'm coming. You're wrong, man. You're all wrong. You've—got to be!"

NINE

HUCK rode clear of everybody. He was in a sullen mood. Young! Why in blue blazes name did kids have to get born young? There'd been Heath heartsick over his Cal. Then the rancher's wife wouldn't let her old man leave the house 'till she learned what the shouting had been about. She'd managed to pry from Sol that that 'bad girl, Mala Fawcett' was the object of her son's affections. Mercifully, she hadn't tried for any more information; probably hadn't dared.

Then Huck got the blame. Hired gun—killer; that's what he was. Nothing had gone right for the Flying H since he'd been sent for. Ha—ha—ha! And as if that hadn't been enough, go to hell if Myra's boy hadn't got uppity when told that the night's ride was one in which he couldn't take part. He, Huck, designated leader for the task ahead, had had to read all sorts of Acts, full of cuss words and corrections, before the young'un had dried out his lip and gone sulking off to the bunkhouse. He'd be damned if the kid weren't nigh as salty as his ma—and he'd be damned again if he could think where Will had got his stubbornness from. It wasn't of Huck's acquaintance at all. Why, Johnno Besant had been one of the most amenable guys you'd meet in a week's

march. That stubbornness would have to go. He just *could not* think where the boy had got it from!

"If you believe there may be shooting danger from the cliffs, Callaway," Heath called suddenly, breaking in upon Huck's torrid thoughts, "why don't we dismount, when we're near enough, and approach on foot along the watercourse?"

"We g'damn aint!" Huck roared. "We're goin' straight up them barrels."

"If they're there."

"We're goin' straight up them barrels and draw their fire right off!"

There! That was settled. He was ramrodding this shindig. He wasn't going to have any stubborn men around him with other notions. No, sir. Not even the top class rancher who was footing the bill. One stubborn kid was enough. Will had a nasty flaw in his character there.

Huck burned up the last of his ill-temper by heaping insults on his horse when it stumbled. Between one thing and another, he felt tired beyond telling. Hunger had begun gnawing at him, too. He should have eaten while he had the chance. He fixed his attention where the hogsback loomed under the moon. The miles seemed inexhaustible; time endless. Might almost have been approaching a great big picture that somebody kept moving back a yard for every one the riders covered. Yet the presence of detail did make itself known and killed off the illusion of a new eternity in space and time. A course of graduated ledges, high in reflective brilliance, showed where the diverted waters had once cascaded from above. The serpentine waver of the Flying H's empty watercourse lay darkly to the right of them.

Huck spurted and rejoined the crew. He was having an attack of conscience. "It ain't that I want anybody to be an Aunt Sally," he explained; "but if we ride in tall, like we don't suspect nothin', it's likely—if we got receivers—they'll open up right off. If that happens, we'll all dump and make cover pronto. It's a risk—sure; but better than sneakin' in an gettin' shot to glory on the rockface!"

Nobody argued. The crew kept looking straight to the front. There was an emanation of dread in the air. Sensing it, the horses slowed and grew fretful as they approached the towering barrier. Huck heard a nervous rubbing of seats against leather, and a clearing of throats. His own mouth was dry and his pulses fluttering. He studied the faces around him; but they were little more than harshly etched, expressionless lines under curled and slouching hatbrims. Hoof-falls seemed to speak. The solitary thud to say 'now'; while clip-clop combinations amounted to 'wait, wait!' "Oh, by gory!" came somebody's strangled whisper.

The cliff grew immense. It filled the mind, swallowed the sky; sucked back the moon. The stone shrank, swelled, and folded in its dizzying plunge from the overhang. It stood as a challenge and a threat. Everybody reined in; sat mutely—for a minute, and yet a minute longer; then Charlie Joad coughed and broke the spell.

"Well, Callaway?" Heath asked quietly, the absence of any satisfaction in his voice louder than triumph's mockery.

"Y'don't figure I'm unhappy, do you?" Huck muttered, his relief intoned but not experienced; for he still wasn't sure. He sent a measuring eye roving into the

upper layers of gloom. "Let's get on with it. Who's the powderman?"

"I've had the experience," Joad said, as everybody stepped down.

"No sneeze there, Charlie. Who's a real nimble climber?"

"Ed Kunz."

"If Ed don't want," Huck said, "I'll go first myself. It's jest that the best man for the job should do it."

"I'll go up," Kunz answered reluctantly, his light, wiry figure shouldering from among his comrades. "Knot me up some ropes."

Several lariats were extended and knotted together; then Kunz tied a free end around his waist. He walked slowly to the cliff-face and looked up, his mouth crimping. "When you was tellin' us what was what earlier on, Mr Callaway, you said there was a ledge we gotta reach. How far out from the water-drop place does it run? Along, I mean. The best climbin' 'ppears to be left of the overhang."

"You'll meet it there."

Kunz went for the first toe and finger holds. He lifted himself on to the rockface, felt around for a few moments, then raised himself another yard. Slowly, and with the caution of a good climber, he followed an irregular upward course until he made a fly-like smudge between deep shadow and the gleaming sliver of light sent down by a moon that was now easing over a tall spur.

"Handy man you got there," Huck said to the rancher.

"They're all handy men," Heath replied proudly.

The shot and a scream from Kunz more-or-less coincided. The climber lingered at his holds for an instant

only, then doubled backwards from the waist and plummeted down. He landed near Huck's feet in a spread of shattered limbs. Then gunshots volleyed from above. Lead started its spanging bounce and whacking thud. The more deeply lulled to a false sense of security by their previous tension, the Flying H riders panicked under the sudden pressures of fear and tragedy. They yelled and swore; spun round and round; crashed into one another; went down, fought and rolled and kicked as they sought the vertical, senseless alike to reason and decency; and yet they were good men. Next fire tongues struck redly from ground level positions over by the dry watercourse. And almost immediately crossfire lashed from the opposite direction.

"Get out, boys!" Huck bawled. "Just get the hell out!"

He boosted the weighty, fumbling Heath on to a swinging horse. The animal began a frenzied climb. Huck stepped to its head and, with both hands dragging cruelly at its mouth, brought it down. The creature now under partial control, he slapped its shoulder and sent it swinging away with its ponderous rider heeling against the motion. Then Huck lost sight of the rancher as other riders bundled him aside in the stampede for their mounts.

The last man passed within inches of the staggering Huck. There was a hollow, bursting noise. Without a murmur, the running waddy pitched earthwards—leaving Huck spattered with blood and brains. Huck dashed the warm mess from his features and glimpsed the dun. He ran at the wheeling animal, jumped—hung, clambered upon it by kicking and jiggling manoeuvres. He grabbed the reins, ducked low, applied the rowels. The dun went lickety-split through the hissing crossfire.

Ahead of it, a mount got hit in the barrel, over-stretched, and crashed flat on its belly. The unfortunate rider pitched into a lightning somersault before smashing to a halt against a boulder. Huck leaned back and pulled hard. The dun jumped cleanly. Over the fallen horse it sailed and made a firm landing. Then it received more spur, pounded beyond the limit of gun range, and galloped on.

Huck straightened his back and took stock. The moonlight showed three or four riders ahead of him. Sol Heath had mastered his horse and still led the flight. Thank heaven the rancher had come out of it. If he'd died, there wouldn't have been much left to fight for. Massacre. That's what the Link Double O riflemen had planned. They'd held their fire until just the right moment. The Flying H hands had been gaping upwards, dummy-still. Perfect targets. It was amazing that any of them had survived. Caleb Heath had earned himself a place high on the list of those who had much to answer for!

Returning his mind to the moment, Huck studied each of the horsemen before him in turn. Over to the right, there. Yes. It was Charlie Joad. Huck headed his mount after the foreman. He soon over-hauled his quarry and, drawing close enough, shouted: "Charlie!"

Joad turned his face to the moon. "Y'want?"

"You quittin'?"

"Don't keep a regiment o' cannon in my g'damn vest pocket!" the foreman protested.

"You got the dynamite, though."

"My luck! I been prayin', up and down, nobody'd put a slug through it!"

"You'd surely have ascended, Charlie, m'boy!" Huck

drew elbow to elbow with Joad. "Must'nt get discouraged. See that dip yonder? Swing west when we get into it."

"What're you up to now?"

"Come to do some blastin'. Ain't goin' home till I've done some blastin'."

"Christopher Columbus!"

"Warned you you was goin' to git used hard. Com-ing?"

"Where you can lead, Huck Callaway, I can foller!"

"That's a spirit I applauds. Jest keep your shirt-tail tucked!"

Into the dip they rode. A touch of right rein fetched their hurry westwards. The mounts punched through rising shadow. Dew-damp sage trampled flat and gave up its sweetness. Now the hooves drubbed where rock lay near the top soil. Thunderheads crossed the moon, fringe-blown and monstrous. The right touch once more. Then the sky grumbled. A rainstorm slashed for a minute and blew out. Moonshine glistened on the wet grass. The hogsback showed again, tumbling the horizon.

To the rocks they came, and dismounted. Huck flung his leathers into a ground-tie. "You strong, Charlie?"

"Am I strong!"

"Then heft them saddlebags of dynamite and come along with me!" Huck plucked the lariat off his pommel and looped it over his arm. "We'll go in by the back door; same way as I went in last time."

Joad slung the saddlebags over his shoulder. They bowed into the steep, boulder-strewn slope that slanted before them. It required ten minutes of sweating toil and muscle-ache to reach the summit. Then they turned east and followed the edge of the rift that had prevented

Huck from crossing to the Flying H side during his previous visit.

For half an hour they struggled on. They reached the point where the rift died and precipices swept to the grass below. Soon the junction to which the widening rock-land brought the water duct, came into view. And after that, it wasn't long before the plank bridge that Link Double O had laid down was sighted. Huck decided that, though the duct wasn't too wide for a horse to jump, there might be some nuisance value in removing the bridge; so, one by one, he lifted the planks and pitched them to the far bank.

"Why not into the water?" Joad demanded.

"What'd you think, if you was a Link Double O gunny and you see'd parts of your bridge go floatin' by?"

Joad tipped his hat. "I ain't thinkin' so smart."

"Comes in the higher education o' stayin' alive, mister."

"That you've had."

"Yeah. Ain't quite Yale, though."

"Yale?"

"One o' them places where guys is so smart they're plain loony."

"Ah." Joad gave his chin an understanding jerk.

They moved on. Huck studied the upward sweep of the rock before it entered its great descending curve towards the dam. Must have been round about here that he had climbed out of the cave and fallen into the water. He crawled along the rising edge of stone, Joad down behind him. They couldn't risk a long throw of shadow that might be spotted by possible rovers among the Link Double O garrison.

Pausing, Huck looked ahead to the curve in the duct around which he recalled having been swept. He made the roughest of calculations in his head. Allow that the flow had swept him fifty yards before he passed round the bend. Back-track a bit from his present position—and it should be somewhere below this point that the hidden cave entrance was located.

He snapped his fingers at the foreman. "Unbuckle the bags, huh? I'll tuck the sticks round my belt. There's one tamped?"

"You bet. Fused it myself for about a ten minute burn. You goin' down there to plant the dynamite?"

"Should work about as good this way round." Huck started packing his belt with the explosive sticks. "Cut a real big chunk off the fuse, Charlie. Don't want it danglin' in the water. And I don't want anybody to reach it before the blow, if we get spotted. Thought I heard men round about."

"So did I," Joad replied uneasily, using a shut-knife to cut the fuse by two thirds of its length. "She'll blow sharpish now."

Huck took the fused stick and shoved it beside the others. He adjusted the noose of the lariat under his ribs and said: "You must anchor the other end. Ain't nowhere convenient to tie it."

"I can do that."

"Say! Have you got a match. Run myself out last night, and forgot to replenish at the ranch."

"Match?" Joad gaped.

"Y'only smokes at Christmas, Thanksgivin', and on the Fourth," Huck growled, with unwarranted sarcasm.

"Don't smoke at all."

"For the want of a match!" Huck groaned.

"Well, I be—! If we ain't a bright couple!" A question grew into the foreman's eyes.

"We'll mebbe die," Huck answered deliberately. "This here Colt I'm carryin' belongs to Will Besant. I'm goin' to use its muzzle fire to light the fuse." He pushed the weapon behind the buckle of his belt. "When it's done, haul me up quick!"

"Quick's the word!" Joad gulped.

"Lower away." Huck backed down the rockface, boots scraping, while the foreman, a crouched shoulder-spread like that of Hercules, paid out the coils. A dozen feet and Huck was deep into the gloom of the duct. He called a halt and swung gently back and forth, looking for the exit out of which he had fallen from the cave. He saw it about five yards to his left. Helping himself as best he could by hands and foot movements, and warning Joad to shift along with him, he edged towards the opening. Then he passed somewhat beyond it, to where he believed the rock wall was thinnest and, after asking to be lowered several feet more, began seeking a suitable aperture into which to jam the dynamite.

The search was long and painstaking. It must have put as much strain upon Joad's strength as it did upon Huck's patience. At last he found a small zig-zag fissure that was just wide and deep enough to accept the explosive sticks. He packed the crack as rapidly as he could. His every nerve was tingling. The distant echo of a foot-fall convinced him that somebody was moving slowly into the vicinity. He and Joad were in grave danger of discovery before their task was complete. He tucked the fused stick near the centre of the charges. It jutted slightly; but that didn't matter. Another scrape of metallised boots. He drew and cocked Will's pistol. "Here

she goes!" he hissed upwards, holding the end of the fuse against the gun muzzle and pressing the trigger. The Colt's crash leapt sky high. Its long barrel flare set the fuse spluttering. He let the gunpowder ribbon fall from his fingers and dangle towards the water. Then he pushed the sixgun back into his belt.

Joad gave a titanic heave and began hauling in on the rope. Startled shouts arose from nearby. Huck's bootsoles scratched and sparked against the stone in his wild efforts to assist his ascent. The ever-tightening rope beneath his ribs seemed already to have cut half way through him. A gun spoke. Shots came raggedly. The foreman straightened against his work. The huge muscles bulged in his forearms as he put out all his power. Huck saw the top of the wall almost within grabbing distance. A second more would do it. Then a fusillade rent the night. Lead clipped, spattered, and shrilled along the upper rim. Huck's straining fingertips rubbed the edge, and tried to hold. But there was a sudden slipping of the rope. Joad shrieked and tottered, wooden-faced, to the brink; then he crumpled forward and hurtled into the duct. Huck fell after him, through shadow and past the livid splutter of the fuse. He grazed stone as he sank into the depths and felt again the current's pluck.

Breaking surface, he fought the water's smothering swirl with threshing limbs. Joad's dead face spun beside him. Their bodies touched, parted, sped to opposite sides of the course, bumped wall, faced about—churned onwards. At the corner the water boiled. Joad disappeared. And Huck submerged, stayed under awhile, surfaced, and turned his face to the livid moon. He heard angry voices. Shadows flitted beside him. Then streamers of scarlet edged his vision. A missile brushed his plastered

hair. Water jetted around him. Men were running along the edge of the duct, making him a target for their pistols. The range over which they shot could be measured in feet only. Yet the erratic play of the current kept his helpless form unscathed.

His popping eyes tipped a wild glance ahead. The dam was rushing at him. They'd get him where the waters struck and mounted before tumbling into their new course.

Then a great flash lit the shadow world behind him. An almighty boom shook the heavens. Masses of rock and water fountained against the moon. There was a disturbance behind the current; a forcing pressure that grew and grew. A wave rushed under Huck and lifted him high. There was the flit-flash of a monochrome world. His passage speeded, and foam creamed around his ears. He spiralled in a great backwash off the top of the dam—poised; went thundering into the unknown terrors of the fall on his left.

TEN

MOONLIGHT, high-water, and sheer drop. Huck dimly realized that these three factors were keeping him alive. Where, after the diversion, water must have passed fleet over the buttressed terraces, now the pools were twice man-deep and cushioning to the plunge. Bobbing, bouncing like a cork, Huck rode the mighty cascade from level to level. The sensation of falling became almost pleasant. He coughed up what water remained in his lungs, and got his wits working properly. He fended himself off jutting boulders, and ducked snags that threatened to rend the features off his head.

Then the flood carried him into a last, long drop. The water shaped about him like a raven curl on a woman's nape. A rumble greeted him. Spitting foam immersed him from toe to head. Down he struck into depths of total blackness—down and down, lungs bursting, brain split, one half lighting a shadow show from the firing blood of the other. The plunge slowed gradually, halted in an agonising moment of suspension, then reversed. He raised his hands above his head; had the presence of mind to kick out with some force. Soon moon-fret laid across the darkness above his eyes. The brightness drew on. He popped through the surface—trod water, let the

foulness rush from his chest. Then sweet air passed into his blood and flushed the dizzying toxins from his brain. He sensed that he was circling: saw that he was circling—watched a tree branch tilt into a vortex not fifty feet distant. A whirlpool. He ought to have felt the onset of new terrors. But his recent experiences had left him much drained emotionally. You lived or you died. Neither mattered all that much. But you did what you could to live. His reasoning was that clear-cut.

He turned steadily round the pool's greatest circle. There was steep rock almost at his touch. He noted the fish-mouthed egress where water broke from the spinning currents and gushed on into the watercourse that returned to the Cimarron. If he could grab an overhanging tip of the egress and turn himself into the watercourse, all would be well; but, if he missed the chance coming up in the next moments, it was unlikely that he'd get a second try; for his next round of the pool would place him past all contact with the point of issue.

Fighting the powerful undertow, he reached forward—almost lifted himself—as the slime encrusted stone drew within his compass. He snatched; his already damaged fingertips skated in the green decay; then they locked against a small, unseen reef. His body floated upwards and poised lengthwise. The tug at him was terrific. He tried to turn his legs into the watercourse narrows. For all his muscle, he was unable to move them. His grip began to lift and break. All he had passed into retaining it. Then a fringe current plucked at his streaming legs. Now he felt the tiniest purchase in the limbs. He got his feet round by an inch or two. The new current helped him the more surely: made his next shift easier; then took over wholly. His body was snatched

round into the watercourse. He bumped a time or two on snags and projections, but was soon gathered onwards by an even flow. Quite exhausted, he allowed himself to be borne along in mid-stream. He was content just to remain afloat.

For several minutes this state of mind persisted; then a sandbar hooked at his feet—dragged him to a virtual standstill. Kneeling in the shifting mass, he crawled ponderously to the southern bank and sprawled flat. His senses ebbed to a tranquil state that bordered on unconsciousness.

He lay motionless for a long, long time. The life force slowly restored his spent tissues. But in the end the chill of his sodden clothing began his revival. He got his knees under him and forced himself to his feet. He staggered around, shivering, easing the ache in his back, and orienting himself. The moon had now passed far towards its set. A livid half-light raised a line of darkened rim-rock. An owl hooted out yonder. No breeze stirred the willows. No gurgle—

Huck turned and shambled to the watercourse. Where, not so long ago, the channel had run almost brimful, now only a shallow trickle of liquid showed on the sandy bed. It had been accomplished, then. The flow had again been diverted. With any sort of luck, it was now brawling along the parched course that looped across Heath's north range. Bawley Fawcett had been set back more than a peg. He'd had the first real smack in the eye he had ever known.

Huck felt pretty good. And then he stopped feeling pretty good. He considered Fawcett the defeated. Fawcett the less than omnipotent. How was the big cattle-man going to take it? Huck remembered a bull Swede—

a railroad spike driver; of greatly inferior mind but similar gosh a'mighty characteristics to the rancher. Swede, the unbeatable—as Swede had thought—had had the tar licked out of him one night by a U.S. Marshal about sixty pounds lighter and with no fist-fighting reputation. With the shattering of his pumped up belief in himself, Swede had gone berserk. He'd taken an axe to store and horse, man and child. Finally, the lawman had had to take a rifle and shoot Swede—as he'd've shot a mad dog or a rampaging bull.

Berserk, Bawley wouldn't go. There was too little raw emotion in him for that. But he might throw all the catches off; take full advantage of his power—martial his forces on an annihilation ride. Show the world that he'd crush his way to all the power and empire that he wanted. Megalomania, that's what them medical gentry called it. Bawley had always been a mite of a megalom-whatta. He might even get away with it. What between the word of the local law and his friends in high places, Bawley'd likely persuade even the Federal riders to overlook the scratching out of a rancher who'd hired a fast gun and gone in for some mighty cute blasting on Link Double O territory. Yeah; that was going to be the wind up. An annihilation ride. And you could depend upon it that Sol Heath wasn't thinking in those terms right now. He'd be mourning what his boy had done, and the men he'd lost. Somebody would have to step in pronto and warn him about Fawcett's probable next move. But the best somebody for the job was standing beside a drib-drabble water-cut, horseless, and miles from anywhere. So what did a guy do?

"Y'start walkin'," Huck advised himself aloud.

Huck walked. The walking helped. Got his circulation

going, cleared the ache from his head and the residue of fear from his system. The rock at this terminal of the hogsback was low and broken. Crossing it was no problem. Beyond lay the beginnings of the brush and draw country into which he had tricked the Lars Dindyke posse. Now he'd got it all to himself—and his feet were telling him so. To the moment, he'd thought up twelve different ways of slaying the man who'd invented the riding boot; each slower and nastier than the last.

He hobbled on, uphill and downhill, ripping himself on thorns and blundering about in bunny runs. The moon disappeared altogether. The stars came out to twinkle their mockery. He got his own back by following them across the seemingly endless nowhere. Then he reached open grass and the dry stick of innumerable cowpads. This must be Heath range that he had come to.

False dawn; dawn; Venus bright against the west—not even dying with the night. Lazy crows blacked the golden prelude to sunrise. Birds. How about breast of chicken? Lord! he was hungry. All he'd got to ease the gnaw was the hard pressure of Will Besant's sixgun against his belly. It amazed him how the weapon had stayed in place through so much violent motion. He'd clean it up good for the boy. Mebbe buy him a new one. Yeah; that'd be nice.

Could a guy be this tired and footsore and still keep plodding?

Then he heard the murmur of water before him. He saw it, a low sunray mirrored in the cool among its wilted reeds. Heath water. The elixir of life to the cattle trade. Huck's last doubt fled. He had certainly succeeded in the task the rancher had set him. That made him

fifteen hundred bucks the richer. If—! Yes, there were about a dozen questions he could set that little word in front of.

The horse was having a drink. He couldn't think why he hadn't seen it before. It was saddled and trail ready; but there was blood on the saddle. He didn't have to ask where the creature had come from. Another forlorn survivor from last night's fiasco under the cliff. All he had to do was cross the stream and reach the animal.

The water wasn't too deep to prevent his wading to the far bank. He sloshed up to the horse. It made no move away from him. Indeed, it seemed pleased to see a man again. Huck cocked for the hull. He collapsed tiredly over the reins. A nudge and a few coaxing words got the mount going. He let it have an easy five minutes then, feeling a little rested himself, jabbed for a canter. Soon he made the canter a run, and the run an all-out gallop. His again drenched garments clung to him icily in the dawnwind.

It was about three notches back from breakfast when Huck swung off the lathered nag at Heath's kitchen hitchrail. He tested the back door, found it unlocked, and walked in. Mrs Heath was sitting at the kitchen table. She was staring blankly at the wall opposite. Her eyes were red and blown; she looked thoroughly used up. Huck guessed she hadn't been to bed all night. "Boss?" he asked. The woman didn't answer; and he didn't repeat himself. He knew where he'd find Heath.

Huck stalked along the passage to the office. The door stood slightly ajar. He pushed it open. Heath was sitting behind his desk, face to the window, back to the door. He was in the act of raising a cocked revolver to his temple.

Halting abruptly, Huck folded his arms and lounged against the door jamb. "That's it," he jeered. "Go on! Blow the top of your head off! Make a g'damn mess for somebody else to clear up!"

The gun remained poised. Heath didn't turn. "What's left?" he asked dully.

"Nothing—or everything. That's your thinkin'."

"My son a traitor to his pa. He admitted it, when he came in and I tackled him with it. All for the girl. Pah! My crew mostly dead. My wife broken hearted. I might as well fight the whirlwind as Bawley Fawcett." The trigger-finger whitened.

"If you're hopin' I'll come and snatch that gun," Huck yawned, "you got another hope comin'. I seen some ugly sights in my time. One more won't turn my stomach. Get on and pleasure yourself with a brainshot. For Pete's sake hustle. I want my doggone breakfast!"

Heath spun now, his sweat beaded face quivering with pain. "Callaway," he said, "you must be the most heartless man on God's earth!"

Huck placed a hand in the middle of his chest. He squinted at the ceiling. "Got somethin' here. Might be a cricket kickin', at that. Me—I had a gutful o' looks at old man Death last night. That critter's mean. Mean! He runs a stacked deck from the start. What d'you want to fill the pot for when you know he's playin' with five Aces?"

"You haven't lived my life, Callaway."

"Ain't I goldurn unlucky? Tell you what. If you'd lived mine, you'd be rail thin and drummin' round a scat-house." Huck jerked himself off the jamb. "Put that bloody Colt back in the drawer, Heath! Pick up what's left of your manhood. You forgotten what it was like

when you was twenty an' you went pantin' after your first woman? There was mebbe days when you'd have cut your gran'paw's throat for a sniff of a whore's petticoats!"

"You're disgusting—!"

"I ain't a nice guy, Heath. I ain't pretended to be. I'm a bully, a gunslick, an opportunist. I'm as jealous as a fat gal, and I jest can't abide bein' beat. That's why Bawley Fawcett got whapped, head-wise, last night—and you got your water back."

"I got—"

"That's it. Your cows can use the north pasture again. Me and Charlie Joad blew the duct wall from the top side. Charlie give his life for YOU. Like I was saying, mine nearly got give up several times; only like I was tellin' Myra the other day, the horny guy who ramrods the stokin' won't have me down below, 'cos once I got there, he'd never be quite sure who was in charge." Huck winked. "I figure he knows I'm a shade faster on the devilment than he is!"

Heath didn't catch the humour. "Charlie dead, too," he said heavily. "Reckoned he must be. That man was as much friend as foreman."

The iron went back into Huck's tones. "The moral is, he had the guts to *live* it all through. You got your cows. You got your ranch. If you ain't got your son, that's no loss. He may do a prodigal one day. So may you, sort of. Human critters is expendable all round. You can hire a new crew. And you can *live* it all through."

"Life," Heath muttered, closing the hammer of his Colt and throwing the gun aside, "the dearest and yet the cheapest thing under the sun. That's the biggest paradox, Callaway."

"That a new cuss word?" Huck asked innocently.

The rancher grinned wanly. "I think you're the cleverest stupid man I've ever run across. There's an undefeatable stubbornness in you—"

"Stubborn!" Huck bawled wrathfully. "That's one thing I ain't. Now that kid, across there, in the bunk-house, he's stubborn—stubborn as a bull-buffalo. But I ain't stubborn. That's one fault I ain't got." He started to count his ribs with a concertina play of his fingers. "I'm hungry. So are you. Time we had breakfast. It'll do Mrs Heath a lot o' good to cook it for us."

"Yes," the cattleman agreed—"yes, it will. And, Callaway."

"Well?"

"I'm obliged."

"Try bein' that next week. We ain't finished yet."

"What's that?"

"If I know my men—and I figure I do—Bawley Fawcett is goin' to hit you with everythin' he's got before the day's over."

"He wouldn't dare!" Heath cried.

"He'll dare. This'll be over, and you can write me my bank draft, when Bawley's been primed for Boot Hill. Jest hope it's my lot to blow that self-pisened sidewinder through Thursday week!"

They went along to the kitchen. Huck promptly complained that, as a member of the Flying H staff, he'd been starved like no place else in the whole wide West. Mrs Heath, who looked about ready to give up the ghost, immediately lost her temper in a big way—and almost got to throwing crockery at Huck, who slumped down at the table and, grousing incessantly, grinned at her back while she pumped the cooking fire red with her

bellows, cracked egg after egg into her skillet, and set the bacon and sausages to frizzle on the griddle adjacent. The final product of all this industry was a giant sized plate heaped with a mountain of food. "Eat every bit of it!" the ranchwife warned. "You no-good, low-natured saddletramp!"

"Yes, ma'am," said Huck meekly. Then he set about demolishing his crew-sized meal with a definite 'start at the top and work downwards' system. It took him half an hour to pack the grub away; but he managed it—with help from a half gallon of coffee.

Mrs Heath looked belligerently at her husband, who had finished eating an age ago. "I've heard complaints from your men about being underpaid. But starved—starved!"

"I ain't any more," Huck belched feebly. "Due apologies, ma'am. Due apologies." He started to rise. One of the new steam derricks in use on the Mississippi levees could have supplied valuable help to his efforts. But he made it under his own power and meandered to the door. "Blisters," he explained, when Heath asked what was wrong with his gait. "I'm goin' to the bunk-house."

"I'll come with you," the rancher said, rising.

"What're you going across there for, Sol?" Mrs Heath demanded.

"Because I must, mother," her husband answered gravely. He joined Huck at the now open door. Then he turned and looked back. "It might be a good idea if you paid your sister Bess a visit in town today."

"Oh, no!" the woman pleaded, breaking again. "Not more? Your men are mostly dead. Your son is lying in his room, near prostrated by the things you called him. I—"

"Caleb should be out," Heath bit at her. "I told him to pack and go. More to come? There's, the worst to come. That's what Callaway thinks."

"Callaway—!"

"It isn't his fault, mother; it isn't his fault. I brought him in to do a job; and, by Harry, admirably he's done it!"

"I'm staying here, Sol."

"This." The rancher gestured all around him, and the gesture was of total destruction.

"I'm staying."

"On your own head—!"

Huck closed the door. The cattleman and he walked towards the bunkhouse. "I wish she'd go," Heath growled.

Huck said: "A woman her age is finished if she loses her man."

The rancher scowled. "You're like a blast from a Montana January."

"The truth don't have to be hot."

They entered the bunkhouse. The occupied bunks were pathetically few. The segundo, Cordy Howlett, sat up, blinked his sticky eyelids, and yawned a greeting. Three other scrubby-jawed faces lifted slowly above blanket level.

"You're foreman now, Cordy," Heath said. "I wish you good morning, boys—and I hope I'll be able to wish you good night. That's what I'm here about."

"You mean Charlie's dead?" asked a horrified Howlett, who was more taken up with the reason for his promotion than anything else. "I see'd him ride clear."

Heath nodded. "He got killed while Callaway and

him were restoring our water from the top of the hogsback. That was after the rest of us had high-tailed."

Howlett brightened up remarkably. "There's water on the north range again? Flyin' H is right back in business!"

"If Bawley Fawcett doesn't give us all the mortal cramp," Heath replied grimly. "That's what we expect he'll try to do today. Who fights? Boys, I want you; I need you. Never more so. But you didn't hire me your guns, and you've maybe seen too much dying already. You can ride, if you want."

"And that's a laugh," Cordy chuckled. "Who'n tarnation'd hire a broken down bunch like us. You bet we seen too much dyin'. Come next time, some of it's goin' to be on the other side. 'Sides, ever know a waddy what truly, truly didn't throw in his iron for dollar-fifty an' keep?"

"Any man is free to ride," said Heath emphatically.

The men jiffled a bit and looked embarrassed; but they somehow gave their boss to understand that he wouldn't get shut of them, not even by firing, just then.

"Didn't think I smelled skunk in here," Huck announced. "Real goodly smell o' lion." He peered closely round the roughly furnished quarters. "And where the hells' that kid? Will Besant!"

"He ain't in the comfort station or what," Howlett said. "He took out—just after sunup."

"Did he say where he was headed?"

"Did you ask?"

"Nope."

"Why not?"

"He ain't on my tally."

Huck paced in a small circle. "Bet he got to worry-

in' about his ma. Ten to a fried ducklin' he's on a skull-crazy ride to find out if she's still prisoner on Link Double O. I'll chew him out good for this one. He only got the soft side o' my tongue last night." Rounding on Heath, Huck asked: "Can I take a horse from the corral? Mine's still with Charlie Joad's over by the hogsback."

"Help yourself to anything you want," the rancher said. "But is it wise to—"

"Further weaken this place?" Huck snarled. "No, it ain't. But if that kid runs into Fawcett—and he jest might!" Huck drew an expressive forefinger across his throat. "I'm responsible for the young varmint."

"Do what you must," Heath said quietly. "I'll see what best's to be done about defending this place. I figure to use the house as my fort. With so few of us, it's better to concentrate."

Huck nodded. "Don't see what better myself," he agreed. Then he strode out-of-doors.

Acutely aware of his breakfast, he roped a chestnut gelding out of the corral. He noticed that Will Besant's grey was still limping round the enclosure. That meant the kid had helped himself to a mount from the ranch string. He ought to have known better. He'd left himself open to a charge of hoss stealing.

Muttering again about the follies of youth, Huck ran the gelding over to the animal that he had ridden in over an hour ago. He transferred saddle, bit, and reins; then he swung up and kicked for a full gallop.

The chestnut carried him fast through the clean airs of the morning. But the draught reminded Huck that he was still wearing clothes that had yet to finish drying on him. Then the motion of the ride made his over-loaded stomach protest sourly. Uncomfortable inside and out,

he felt the sudden storm and subsidence of his temper. Depression followed. He began to question his latest actions. Was he carrying this responsibility business too far? The kid was all kinds of a fool. He was made that way. So let him be a fool. Myra Besant—Will, her son; what were they *really* to him? He'd hired himself to Sol. Now he'd cut out and might get shot up when Heath needed him most. Was he jeopardising duty for—love? Love; an idiot's tale about idiots. You got enthralled by illusory values in this person or that, and you stopped being your own man for trying to live in their image.

He'd have his belt off to that boy. So help him, he would!

Then he heard the sullen roll of gunfire against the lurching scarps of the north.

It was his heart that delivered the spur.

ELEVEN

TIME seemed to fret away—distance to stretch; motion to possess a treadmill futility. Grass and draw; sand gravel, shale; boulder and outcrop; sage, greasewood, dwarf oak. Each advanced, stood a moment and passed, yet seemed to persist in an objective density that bogged the mind and made it grateful for the quicksilver rip of the guns.

At last Huck saw the Kudo trail ahead. Hooves rasped and sparked as he wrenched left and galloped for the heights. Now that he had rock under him and could feel the bite of iron, he became as much aware of speed as he had previously been of its seeming absence. He hit the grade, gave the horse no respite, pushed round corners—high, high, into the steepest places; heart knocking, throat tight, eyes blurry; high, high—higher yet; to the mouth of the crag-top defile, where he saw a horse standing, reins a-dangle, and gunsmoke blowing above a shielded platform well up on the way inside the narrow way.

Huck jumped off his mount. He ran forward and began climbing the rocky tiers that led up to the platform. "Will!" he shouted.

"Hi, Mr Callaway," the kid greeted.

Struggling on to the platform, Huck knelt under the screening boulders and snarled: "I'll give you Mr Callaway—hellion!" He lifted his head to see what was going on beyond the position. He saw a horse or two standing at the far end of the defile, and guns jutting from such cover as there was along the trailside. Two motionless figures lay sprawled in the open. Then rock splinters fountained around Huck, and metal slammed and whacked against the cliff section behind him. He snatched his head down in a hurry.

"Link Double O," Will explained.

"Y'don't say!"

"Got 'em exactly where I want 'em. Figured they must be headin' for Heath's place, which'd mean you made out last night with the dynamite."

"That pound of mud you keep stashed above your tongue works sometimes, boy," Huck remarked. "Don't over-strain it, though."

"I've nailed two of 'em," Will protested. "They'd've hit Flyin' H by now."

"Good ole Horatius!" Huck snorted. "You goin' to hold 'em all day?"

"Why not?" The boy took aim and blasted with his rifle, then ducked under another stone-chipping fusillade.

Huck answered now. "Because Fawcett'll have left a handful of guys here to keep you busy. That's so you don't get no ideas about doin' a Pony Express back where y'come from. That Bawley will've led the bulk of his men to the other end of the hogsback. They'll cross over and get at Heath that way. It'll take a bit longer, that's all."

"Then I'm jest—"

"Wastin' ammunition. Was you worried about your ma?"

"Bad."

"And somewhat mad at me?"

"Worse."

"You jest wait till you get my tail wound up proper. Sonny, I'll bellow an' roar like—!" Huck broke off, scowling. "Let's get out of here. You ain't goin' to get to your ma. And we ain't doin' Heath a blind bit of good."

"Them guys over there'll follow."

"Let 'em. We'll beat 'em back to Flyin' H. We should still get in well ahead of the Fawcett party, too. Heath'll hear for sure what's comin', and have two more defenders. Right?"

The kid nodded. He raised up and blasted off three shots in quick succession, after which they backed off his defensive position and descended to the defile mouth. "Git to them hosses, hoss thief!" Huck ordered, as they darted from cover and ran to the mounts.

"Hey!" Will protested, when his companion took the big barrelled black that he had been riding.

"Climb up that chestnut—and hold your yammer, boy! That critter's been pushed. You're a lot lighter'n me. Ride!"

They went down the grade at full stretch. On this gallop, neither beast gave cause for worry. Motion remained fast, fluid, and unbroken. The pursuers—just three of them; which confirmed Huck's belief that the bulk of the Link Double O force had gone over the hogsback—remained at long gunshot. The occasional bullets they fired were an expression of frustration rather than belief in their marksmanship.

The familiar miles passed, and the Flying H home buildings came in sight. Huck looked over his shoulder. He expected the pursuers to break off the chase about now and circle northwards, to join their main party. But the men persisted, even to the firing of more shots.

At about half a mile out, the thing happened that Huck had been hoping for. Cordy Howlett and two other horsemen galloped from the blind side of the bunk-house. The riders rowelled their fresh mounts viciously. They closed at a tremendous pace. Then Sol Heath and another man appeared from the right of the house and arced to cut off the northern escape route.

"Turn, Will—turn!" Huck ordered, fetching his horse round on the climb. "Charge 'em!"

Letting out Comanche war whoops, Huck drove at the enemy, pistol drawn. The kid pressed almost to his elbow, then used an expert one-handed flick-and-snap to cock his Winchester. The rifle boomed. A hat opposite went flying, the owner making a futile snatch at it. The Link Double O riders hesitated—panicked as another slug from Will passed among them, bungled their turns and rode their horses into one another. They lost all-important seconds sorting themselves out.

One man—Huck remembered him as Loll Deal—swung at the waist and, in the despair of the moment, blazed five bullets at the kid. Will got his head down. Huck sighted on the broad of Deal's body and triggered. The hammer snapped sharply. Second and third attempts to detonate met the same lack of result. Then Huck recalled that all his ammunition had again spent a long time under water. He hadn't a bullet on him that could be relied upon to explode. He had encouraged a

close quarters battle while armed with what amounted to no more than a short club.

But this was no time for regrets or turning aside. With another terrifying war whoop rasping his tonsils, he went straight for Deal and swung his pistol barrel at the man's skull. There was a crunching of bone. Deal screamed; blood spurted from his ears. He toppled earthwards, but a foot remained trapped in its stirrup and his frenzied mount towed his bouncing shape into the distance.

Huck went madly at the second rider. A .45 exploded almost in his face. Powder-fire singed his hair. He prodded an exposed midriff with his gun muzzle. The recipient blew windily and jack-knifed over his pommel. Then a hole appeared in the top of his hat as the kid drilled him from crown to jaw. Seeing the fate of his comrades, the third Link Double O man set up a fine gallop. But four guns were now trained upon his back. He was struck by a weight of lead that literally hurled him over his horse's head. "If they weren't the biggest g'damn fools that I ever rid agin!" Huck criticised. "They begged for it!"

"Three more the less," panted Cordy Howlett, sidling over as he spun the cylinder of his sixgun in a quick reload. "Makes me feel better."

"Sure," Huck agreed. "Even Fawcett can't go on losin' men for ever!"

Sol Heath galloped up. He slowed his mount and trotted a slow figure of eight around the two corpses. "That was costly for Link Double O," he remarked.

"He was jest sayin', they was lambs to the slaughter," the new foreman said, digging a thumb at Huck.

"You got the boy back, Callaway," the rancher ob-

served, frowning at Will Besant. "I had a spy glass on the pair of you as you rode in."

"No need to get savage at him," Huck said. "His worry about his ma turned out well for us." An explanation followed of how the kid had held the defile against Link Double O and compelled Fawcett to approach the Flying H by the longer way round. "If it hadn't happened like that," Huck ended, "Bawley'd've caught us between sluice and caboose."

The cattleman nodded. "Well done, boy," he praised briefly. "Let's get back to the house. It won't be long before Fawcett's with us. He'll come at us like a tiger!"

"How's the ammunition situation?" Huck asked quickly, stepping to the ground.

"About a thousand rounds," Heath replied. "Most of the guns make it convertible. Why?"

"This feller don't need a pistol and such," Huck explained, helping himself to a dead man's gunbelt, .45, and the Winchester from the boot of his standing horse. Huck draped the gunbelt in front of his own saddle, then stepped up again. "That about sets me up. Let's go."

They rode in and dismounted at the corral. The drop poles were lowered and the animals were turned into the enclosure. Huck helped close the corral again, then emptied the dud ammunition from Will Besant's pistol and reloaded with shells from the appropriated gunbelt. "Yours, kid," he said, tossing Will the weapon. "My thanks for the long loan of it."

Will smiled, caught the Colt, and holstered it. Then everybody went in at the kitchen door.

Heath had done what he could about defence arrange-

ments. Boxes of ammunition lay open beside advantageous firing points. The heaviest pieces of furniture had been dragged into positions from which they could readily be used to barricade the doors. And buckets of water had been provided against the possibility of fire. In a quiet corner, Mrs Heath was grimly tearing up a sheet to make bandages. She also had a table prepared upon which stood an enamel basin and a probe. Scissors, cotton waste, and antiseptic added their grim reminders to the scene.

Huck lounged against a window that faced north. The magazine of his rifle was crammed to capacity. His pistol lay on the sill beside him. His ear was straining upwards. A waddy named Bender had climbed on to the roof and was leaning against the chimney. His job was to shout down news of Link Double O's sighting.

Jests passed back and forth through the house. There was a lot of over-loud laughing. A bottle of liquor was going the rounds. Huck didn't touch it. He made sure the kid didn't either. Firewater courage was the kind that got a man killed.

Time dragged. The atmosphere became all of a quiver. Laughter ceased. The silence was just as loud. Huck paced softly through the rooms, passing from one firing point to the next. Men had ceased to look at one another. Their glances had grown sly and furtive. They were seeking their own fear upon the features of the next guy in line. A clock's tick died in the whirring clank of an hour striking. Eleven o'clock. Mrs Fawcett dropped a tin mug on some stone tiling. The kid, whom Huck had just rejoined, jumped a foot in the air. "Scared, son?" Huck asked kindly.

He got a sickly nod.

"Could just about spew myself."

The boy grinned, and swallowed hard.

More time passed. A guy could hear the house breathing.

"Here they come!" Bender shouted from the roof.

The house chilled with shock.

Then Huck saw them, too. A line of riders extended across the land. Not so many. A dozen; not more than sixteen. But they looked like an army.

The attackers walked their mounts; at a signal they cantered; at another they galloped. Smoke belched along the line—lifted with the breeze; vanished. Glass rained musically. A thudding and thwacking was heard as brickwork and wood absorbed lead. Here and there the random missile shrilled. The next volley was fired from closer in. Windows dissolved in dancing moments of prismatic beauty; frames were gouged and splintered. A bullet ricocheted by Huck's ear and whirled round and round the room, shattering china ornaments, ripping keys from the piano—and finally lodging in the head of a venerable relation whose painted likeness disappeared behind starred glass.

Huck raised his Winchester. He sighted and squeezed. His target went riding on. He tried again. Another miss. The cuss words started to tumble. Hitting a man on the move wasn't the world's easiest chore—especially when the air around you was alive with speeding lead.

Now a horseman was spurring straight at the window. Huck lined chest, fore and backsights. The rider's right hand swung over; a fused canister sailed away from it. Huck triggered. The mount turned aside, its saddle empty. Then the canister landed six feet short of the window. Fire instantly erupted skywards, and blast flung

what was left of the window inwards. Huck shook dust off himself, and spat. He tried to get his rifle back into action, but a second canister hurtled towards the house and passed through the window of the next room.

There was a tremendous crash. The house rocked to its foundations under the concussive impact. Cracks appeared in the walls, and much of the ceiling fell; pictures shattered and tipped drunkenly, and the piano set up a jangling cacophony as the case fell from it and it stood naked and unstrung. Mrs Heath shrieked. The kid coughed so much in the gyrating dust clouds that his eyes bulged from his head.

Huck staggered to the door of the room adjoining. He wrenched it open, and crossed the threshold. A thick haze containing smoke and nitrates swirled at him. He burst through its choking centre. A scarlet glow was extending near the outer wall. He saw a bucket of water standing beside a shattered bookcase. The contents of the bucket had remained largely unspilled; so he dashed the liquid at the fire. Steam hissed and mushroomed hotly; the glow died away. Bullets flitted amidst the cloying mist in which Huck gasped. Then another door was torn open. In the conflicting draughts, the vapours broke and ebbed. Huck's breathing eased, and he saw pitted walls, blood, and ruin. The room's single defender lay near the window. His entrails spilled blue and white across the floor. And there was ash upon a face that had a chunk of iron protruding jaggedly from its forehead.

"Is that Nat Huggins?" came Sol Heath's horrified question.

Huck turned and saw the rancher standing behind him. "Nat Huggins? It was a man; that's all I can tell you. They're using grenades."

"We can't stand this!"

"Want to surrender?" Huck demanded. "Want to get on the wrong end of a turkey shoot?" He strode to the window. The Link Double O riders were circling the ranch house. They were fewer than they had been. Another canister was bowled into the air. Huck lofted his rifle and gave it what he had given Wesley's dynamite stick. The grenade disappeared in a vivid flash. Its packing of lead and iron fragments struck among the passing horsemen. Riders and beasts buckled in ugly, bleeding, kicking heaps. "That's how you get right side of a turkey shoot!" Huck snarled, steadying himself against the wall as the house rocked under another deafening blast. "Hold this window. They'll try now from the other side!"

Huck flung himself from room to passage. He groped through an accumulation of powdersmoke. He pushed into the ranch office. A grenade landed at the moment of his entry, an inch of fuse still spluttering from it. He snatched up the bomb and hurled it back whence it had come. It rolled under the hooves of a passing horse. Up went the animal, rider and all, limbs, head, and hide parting in a splurge of blood and flesh.

Huck took up the centre of the room. He aimed and triggered. Aimed and triggered. There as nothing wrong with his marksmanship now. His targets were going down fine. Just so they kept coming!

Then he heard Mrs Heath scream again. That woman! He'd have to go and see why she had let out that g'damn holler. Back into the passage he went, then into the room he had left Heath defending. The rancher was lying on the floor. His wife was crouching over him, tears dripping from her chin. "It's nothing, mother!" he

was protesting. "Nothing! Just punctured lard a yard and a half from my belly!"

Huck had a look at the wound. Heath was leaking like a hog in the shambles; but his assessment of his hurt was a true one. "Ain't nothin' to pitter about!" Huck roared in the woman's ear. "Do him good to let a little out. Make him right for your cookin'!"

He left the woman sobbing between nervous torment and relief. A sixgun was booming next door. Sounded hot in there. The kid! The kid! "Will!" he cried. "Will!" The pistol went on pounding.

Huck speeded into the next room. The kid stood a little back from the window. He was blazing among men who were trying to enter. Then Will's hammer bit into a used shell. He flung the empty weapon aside and snatched up the Colt that Huck had left lying on the windowsill. But in that moment a slug smashed through the outer part of the kid's left shoulder and whirled him aside.

Huck charged the window. His rifle boomed once; then it, too, was empty. He reversed the weapon and held it as a club. He swung mightily at the jowled and weather-fretted faces that bunched before him. The attackers ducked below sill level. Huck was carried too far on by the force of his own effort. Hands grabbed the rifle and tugged him outwards. Then a pistol barrel slashed across his forehead. He reeled backwards into the room and crashed to the floor, semi-conscious. Black, fuzzy shapes crossed his vision's red horizon. A Colt seemed to stretch until it almost touched him. An explosion was followed by a jarring of the floor between his fork. His brain registered dully that he had been shot at—and missed. He tensed himself. It'd be the next

one. No man could miss twice from almost point blank range!

Shutting his eyes, Huck waited. There came a new thunder of gunfire. But he felt nothing. His wits were rapidly clearing. He realized that the racket originated above rather than ahead of him. He opened his eyes again, and looked up. Leaning slightly forward, Colt flashing, the kid had stepped astride his prostrate form and was defending his life. Two of the attackers were down, dead or dying, under the window; but two more were leaning on the sill, guns pointing. The weapons spoke. Will Besant crashed stiffly backwards. His pistol dropped at Huck's fingertips.

Seizing the weapon, Huck sat up and cuffed the hammer. One of the faces staring at him took on a vacant look and disappeared. But the enemy remaining triggered lead that scorched his ribs and made him wince. He was transferring his aim as flame lanced at him again. The tip of his right boot bulged open, and he knew by the numbness that part of his little toe had gone. He fired. The Link Double O man slumped over the windowsill, minus the top of his head.

Dazedly, Huck fumbled a reload; then he levered himself upright and limped unsteadily to the window. He crouched to one side and peered out. The horsemen had ceased to circle. He saw dead men and maimed brutes lying everywhere. He turned and looked at Will Besant's inert form. The boy's head was a scarlet mess. Grief for Myra. Oh, what grief! He knew he was going to feel it himself. But he couldn't just then.

There was a sudden and absolute silence. Huck couldn't stand it. He knew instinctively that it was the forerunner of an ultimate evil.

THE TRAIL TO HELL

Then, from the other side of the house, Bawley Fawcett's voice rose in a great shout. "Callaway, come out!"

"I'll see you dead first!" Huck yelled.

"No, you won't, man! You'll see Myra Besant dead!"

The Colt clattered from Huck's nerveless hand.

TWELVE

HUCK made it out of the front door. Blood squelched from the burst toe of his boot. His ribs felt as if a whole nest of stinging ants had been at them. And his eyes weren't so good either.

But he could see Bawley Fawcett all right. The rancher was sitting a black horse between two mounted women. One of the women was the voluptuous Mala, his daughter; the other was Myra Besant. To Myra's head he held a silver plated sixgun.

"So you brought her along," Huck growled contemptuously. "The last card."

"Or the sacrifice," Fawcett mocked, his pistol arcing to cover the newcomer.

"Thought you loved her."

"You do."

"I ain't ashamed of it."

"Now you're the sacrifice." Fawcett laughed. "I knew it'd take more than water to kill you. You're a worthy opponent Callaway. I knew if there was any worthwhile resistance at this place, it would be of your making."

"Give him t'me, boss!" It was Iggy Farson who was pleading. Iggy was in the background, right arm sling

supported. Beside his gelding sat Bill Wesley and another horseman. These riders appeared to be the only survivors from a ride that should have meant Flying H's total destruction.

Huck had a good spit. "Looks like we done pretty good. You're kinda short-handed now, Fawcett."

"I've men enough left. You see?" The cattleman pointed towards the ranch doorway. Huck craned over his shoulder. A stout gunny was herding Sol and Mrs Heath into the open. Sol was bent double and still bleeding; but his discoloured features showed no sign of fear. His wife had stopped crying and had her chin up.

"If there are any more Flying H defenders left alive," Fawcett shouted, "they should come out with their hands up! We have your leaders. It is over!"

There were moments of silence. Then Cordy Howlett and a narrow-chinned cowboy called Fletcher dragged into view. They dropped their weapons behind them and slouched towards Fawcett, heads drooping.

The cattleman nodded his satisfaction. "Now for the accounting," he said. "Wesley, line up the Heaths and those hands. I want them shot down. We'll throw the bodies back into the house and set the place on fire."

"What about Callaway, boss?" Farson asked plaintively.

"Patience, Igor!" the rancher commanded. "I'm going to hang him up. And he's going to remain hanging until his body rots to pieces. You shall whip the horse out from under him."

"Thank you, suh," Iggy fawned gratefully.

In the meantime, Bill Wesley and the stout gunman

had pushed Mr and Mrs Heath and the cowboys into a ragged line. Wesley signalled for Igor Farson and the other Link Double O rider to join him. The gunmen dismounted and walked towards the house. They drew and cocked their pistols.

The Heaths crouched together, Sol's arm tightly about his wife's waist. Cordy Howlett pulled his shoulders back and watched the passing clouds. But Fletcher, grey faced and shivering, lost his nerve, dropped to his knees, and joined his hands in the attitude of prayer. "Must I die?" he pleaded. "Oh, why must I die?"

Wesley gave the cowboy a light tap on the head with his gunbarrel. "Because you has crossed the boss. And the boss don't like bein' crossed. Now git up!"

"Don't be afraid, lad," said Sol Heath pityingly. He put out a hand and laid it upon the kneeling man's head. "Maybe we're the lucky ones."

"An' maybe you ain't!" Wesley jeered, glancing at Fawcett. "Okay, sir?"

"When you like."

The pistols levelled for brainshots.

Then everybody's attention was drawn by a movement in the ranch doorway. A young man, powder-blackened, and with his clothes in rags, shuffled into view. He held a shotgun in his hands. "Back!" he warned the executioners. "Throw down your guns. Back, you devils—or I'll blow your master out of his saddle!"

"It's that milksop, Caleb Heath!" Farson exploded. "Give you any odds he's been hidin' under the bed!"

"Will you look at his face!" Wesley warned. "He means it!"

"Cal, my boy—" Fawcett began.

"Drop your gun, too," Caleb rasped, "or I'll kill you this moment!"

"Caleb, darling," Mala Fawcett simpered.

The younger Heath looked at her with loathing. "This gun has two barrels. What a fool you and your father made of me! You wanted the land. More money. Power! Time my father retired, you said. The work was getting too much for my mother. You'd see they left the district so well provided for they could live like royalty for the rest of their lives. You knew I was angry because my father treated me like a tenderfoot and wouldn't let me anywhere near cattle business. You got me to tell you about Callaway; then about Callaway's plans. You used me. Because of me, men have died. Many men! I've shamed myself past redemption! I've earned my father's hate! I've broken my mother's heart! For what?"

"For love of me, Cal," Mala soothed. "For love!"

"Lust is all you know!" the young man flared bitterly. "How many men have there been already? Fools, like me! Heaven bear me witness! I'll never touch another woman as long as I live!"

The oath was fulfilled within the second. Fawcett flicked a Derringer from the top of his boot and shot Caleb through the heart. In dying, the young man jerked both triggers of the shotgun. The weapon belched its massive loads of buckshot, directly at the rancher. Shattered beyond recognition, the remains of Bawley Fawcett jerked over the rear of his horse and landed several feet away.

Frightened by the explosions, the mount on which Mala Fawcett was seated began to kick and rear. She

fought it with spur and leather, hammering at its skull with the loaded end of a crop. The animal's fear turned to rage. It swung away and galloped straight at the corral poles. Mala tore the bit with all her strength. The horse stopped short and bucked savagely. The girl flew over its mane and crashed against the poles. She rebounded, only to lie motionless, her head twisted almost back to front.

Nobody moved. Mala Fawcett was clearly past help. There was an instant of profound silence.

Then Igor Farson shouted: "Goin' to git you, Callaway!" And, snatching his gun off the ground, the big man blasted at Huck. But Huck was already down and spinning towards Fawcett's silver-plated weapon. Slugs thumped around him. The fancy sixgun came to hand. He lay full length and centred on the giant's towering form. The dust from a near miss puffed into his eyes as he fired. Farson staggered. Huck gave him another. The big man's jaws gaped in a bull bellow, then a scarlet stream gushed into his beard and dripped through to his chest. A third bullet slammed him against the house wall. Then he crumpled brokenly to the ground. Huck knew it was over between them for keeps.

"That'll be enough!" bawled a voice full of authority. "Hold it, everybody! I got twenty guns pointin' your way!"

Huck rose and faced round. Unnoticed in the excitement of the past few minutes, a large body of horsemen had ridden up and halted about twenty yards away. The party was led by an ugly looking character, with an arrogant set of chin and black, calculating eyes. He wore a law star pinned to the washed-out yellow of his shirt-front.

Loosing his gun, Huck limped over to the man. "You'll be Lars Dindyke," he said.

"You'll be Huck Callaway," the other countered.

"Seems we're both right."

"Well, you sure give us some exercise, Callaway. We've been huntin' you since you broke town. Now I'm goin' to arrest you."

"What for?"

"Murderin' Mal Rigset."

"Murder, be damned! There's a town full of people who'll testify that Rigset died in a fair fight—now."

"Huh?" The black eyes were watchful—even fearful; they roved quickly over the scene.

"That mess you see yonder," Huck announced flatly, "is Bawley Fawcett. Gather he used to be a bit of a paymaster hereabouts. All kinds of folk was drawin' from him. Reckon you've guessed Bawley wanted Sol Heath's ranch. You bein' an intelligent man an' all. This 'after Gettysburg' etchin', o' which you don't look overly approv'in', is the result. Bawley's been on the trail to hell for a long time. Guess he's got there at last!"

"There'll have to be a big hearin'," Dindyke spluttered.

"Bigger the better," said Huck expansively. "Let's have us a Federal judge and some o' them snazzy lawyers what asks questions what is mighty hard to answer. Like what the local law was doin' to let Sol Heath get so g'damned underdog'd by that three-tailed skunk with a varmint's phys., Bawley Fawcett."

"Or how I came to be used as a hostage by the same man," Myra Besant put in.

Huck rubbed his nose. "All kinds o' questions them lawyer fellers can ask."

"I should've arrived sooner," the sheriff muttered viciously.

"I'm real glad you didn't."

"I'll remember that!"

"No, you won't!" Huck said with profound emphasis. "You got a lot of honest men with you. Which reminds me. There's three Link Double O guys over there what ain't honest. One especially. William Wesley, esquire. He needs hangin', but I guess he'll escape the rope. He's rat enough to squeal real loud, if you tread on his tail. Might even fill a nice big record with Fawcett's misdoins. That'd satisfy them snouty Federal folk. Save everybody trouble. Keep the taxes down."

"Yeah," Dindyke growled thoughtfully. "Yeah." Then he glared at the three gunmen. "Mount up, y'hellions. I got a line of bars for you to itch agin!"

After last covert glances of hate in Huck's direction, Wesley and his companions slouched to their horses. The posse cantered up and closed around them. In two minutes the party was on its way to town.

"Them Link Double O's'll get off too easy," Cordy Howlett complained. "They was goin' to murder us. You showed that b-d Dindyke a get-out."

"For everybody," Huck admitted. "Them that mattered is dead. You gotta compromise, Cordy. Sol and me ain't been doin' things all that legal. Who'd really want that big born inquiry? Sol's had all a man can rightly take." Huck nodded round to where the Heaths were weeping over the corpse of their son. "Get your boss indoors, Cordy. He's doc hurt."

"Sure; I'll look after the old man."

Huck slapped the foreman on the back. "You have, feller. Y' have." /

Howlett left him. Then he saw Myra standing at his elbow. Her eyes held a question. And he knew why there was a great sadness in him. He shook his head.

"Will?" Myra didn't want to understand.

"He died savin' my life, Myra."

"I see." Her eyes clouded, but she didn't break down. "Where?"

Huck led her into the house; led her to the room where her son lay. She looked at Will, and still she didn't weep.

Gesturing helplessly, Huck said: "Jest stood over me—'cos I wasn't able—and kept firin' till they got him."

"Our son," Myra said, a little break in her voice.

"I guess, somehow, I knew," Huck gulped.

"So did he."

Bending, Huck swept the boy's body into his arms. It was still warm and limp. He felt a heart beating strongly against his own. Then he had his first good look at the kid's head wound. Suddenly he started to cackle in high glee. "Well, if it don't run in the family. His skull's like his old man's. So g'damn thick slugs jest glance off it!"

"He isn't—?" Myra gave a wonderful smile.

"Nope. Stunned. He'll be round soon. And there's that hole in his shoulder. He'll mend, next to no time!"

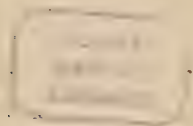
"Huck you're crying again."

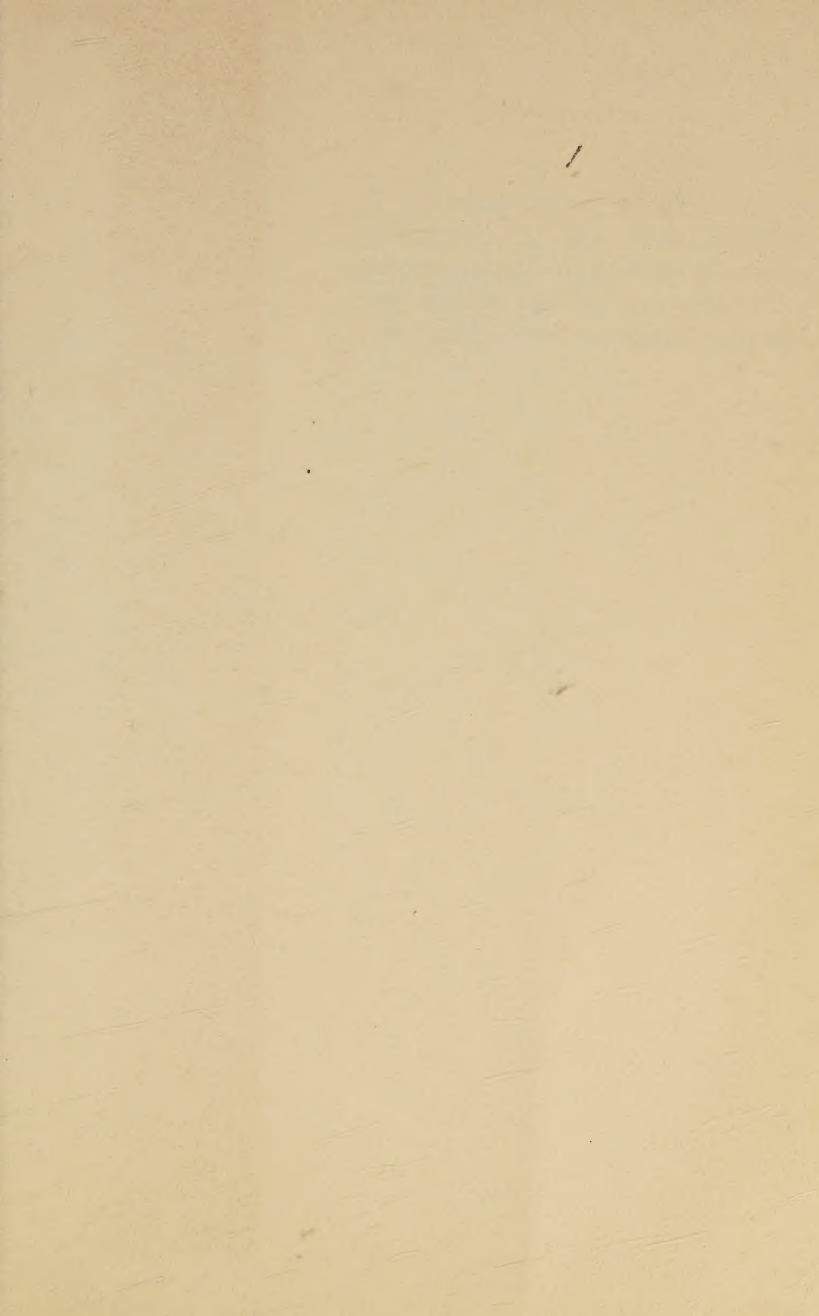
"I aint! I stuck the other thumb in my eye." He sniffed. "Yes, sir. We got us about three quarters of a pretty good man right here. Figure I'll stick around and see he makes that other quarter good."

THE TRAIL TO HELL

Myra said: "So you think we made a man. Has anybody said we're too old to do it again?"

Huck gave his head a good scratch. "If that is an offer, ma'am, it is accepted. Where do they keep the parson?"





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